

“I like to think of Lent as a kind of extended retreat. It’s an opportunity to step away from business as usual, and to turn our attention back to the Lord who loves us and who died for our sins.” –Bishop John T. Folda

The Journey of Lent

On March 2, we celebrated Ash Wednesday and began the season of Lent. With the imposition of ashes, we heard those haunting words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This isn’t a statement of despair, but an exhortation to recall the shortness of our lives here on earth and to look forward with hope toward the eternal life that awaits us.

The forty days of Lent hearken back to the forty years the Israelites spent in the desert, a time of purification when they needed to leave behind whatever kept them from God. That should be our goal as well, a detachment from sin and the things of this world that keep us from our relationship with God. The season of Lent is much like the journey of the Israelites. We enter into the spiritual desert in order to be more perfectly one with our Lord.

The forty days of Lent also recall the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert. After his baptism, he went into the desert where he fasted and prayed intensely. He experienced temptations from the devil, temptations to put aside his Father’s plan and to take an easier way forward, but he firmly rejected those temptations. The observance of Lent helps us to focus deeply on God’s presence in our lives, and also to reject whatever temptations might draw us away from him.

Most of us probably grew up with the custom of “giving up” something for Lent. It might have been a favorite food, television, or an activity that we typically enjoy. This practice of fasting unites us to the fasting of Jesus, and helps us to detach from anything that might hold us back on our journey to God. Perhaps we fast from a particular food or a beverage. Or, maybe we fast from television or the internet. The Church offers us days of fasting and abstinence—Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and the Fridays of Lent—but there is great spiritual benefit to a daily fast that leaves more room for God in our lives.

Lent is also a time of prayer. Jesus prayed in the desert because he had a constant desire for union with his Father. We pray because we need that same union, a union with the One who made us and has loved us from all eternity. Lent is an excellent time to read the Bible, perhaps a chapter or two a day from one of the Gospels, or from one of Paul’s letters. The Word of God will always be a pathway for closeness to our Lord. Many choose to pray the Stations of the Cross during Lent, a beautiful devotion that allows us to walk with Jesus on the sorrowful journey of his Passion. The greatest prayer of all is the Mass, which is the sacrifice of Christ made present to us at the altar. When I was in college, I started the habit of attending a daily Mass during Lent whenever I could, and it was a great blessing in my life. I encourage everyone to attend Mass and pray before our Eucharistic Lord as often as possible, especially during Lent.

Of course, Lent is about more than giving up chocolate, or television, or video games. Lent is also about charity, the love of others. Jesus commands his followers to give alms, to share our riches with others, especially the poor. Some form of almsgiving or charity should be part of our Lenten observance. Pope Francis cautions us, however, not to be content with just making a monetary donation. He urges us to come face-to-face with the poor, with those in need, and to give of our time as well. For many of us, the gift of time is the most precious gift of all, and to give time to another is a real act of sacrificial love. A visit to an elderly neighbor, a phone call to a lonely friend, or an email or card to someone who is grieving, can be a gift of love that also blesses the giver. When we give of ourselves unselfishly, we begin to know the love of Jesus more personally.

For our catechumens and candidates, the season of Lent is a time of preparation to receive the sacraments for the first time at Easter. Every year at the Rite of Election on the first Sunday of Lent, I greet those courageous brothers and sisters who are looking forward to their Baptism, Confirmation, and first Eucharist. It’s always an inspiration to see them gathered at the Cathedral with their pastors, sponsors, and family members, and it reminds us that we are all on a journey of conversion.

One of the most powerful experiences of conversion during Lent is taking part in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. There is nothing more liberating than making a full confession of our sins and hearing the words of absolution from the priest confessor. Every one of us is in need of repentance, because we are all sinners. But Jesus gives the power of forgiveness to his Church as a sign of God's merciful love, and we should be sure to take advantage of that mercy as often as possible, especially during this holy season. If it has been a long time since you went to confession, now is the acceptable time!

I like to think of Lent as a kind of extended retreat. It's an opportunity to step away from business as usual, and to turn our attention back to the Lord who loves us and who died for our sins. This extended period of prayer, fasting, and charitable works also reminds us that conversion is a lifelong project. Every day is another opportunity to respond to God's grace and to prepare for the moment when we will stand before our Lord, hopefully to rejoice with him in eternity. May this year's journey of Lent be such a time of grace for all of us.