



## THEOLOGY CORNER

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### “What Should I Give Up For Lent?”

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The Liturgical Season of Lent begins on March 2 (Ash Wednesday). During this time, Catholics around the world participate in this 40-day season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Within this period of preparation for the Lord’s Resurrection at Easter, the faithful seek out ways in which they can grow in faith. One common practice amongst Catholics is to give up something they enjoy during Lent. But what should you give up? Before making this decision (if you haven’t already), I would like to reflect on what some people think this practice is, and offer some clarification on the matter so that we can truly make the most out of this penitential season. Some people think of Lent as the time in the liturgical life of the Church when they are forced to keep up with formal obligations that the Church imposes upon the faithful. They see it as a period of time in which they give up some of their freedoms because that is just what we are asked to do. This does not at all get at the purpose for what the Church asks of us. Rather, Lent is a time when we are directed to inch closer and closer, day by day, toward true freedom. The Church indeed asks that we make sacrifices, yet this is not to take away our freedom, but to soften our hearts so that they may be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit through a hunger and thirsting for God.

I mentioned at the beginning of this article that Lent is a time of “prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.” As for the fasting part, on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, the faithful are called upon to fast (i.e., to eat only one full meal and two smaller meals that do not together equal a full meal). There are, of course, allowances for those who have a medical limitation or simply for those over the age of 59. Abstinence refers to abstaining from meat on all Fridays of Lent. This is done in order to honor our Lord who gave up his flesh for the redemption of the world, as we imitate this sacrifice by giving up warm-blooded flesh for food. When most people think about Lent, they think of the fasting and abstinence part of it. While I am tempted to say that prayer and almsgiving are more important to consider, I think there is some truth in the idea that Lent is centered on fasting. What I mean here is not merely a physical fasting, but also (even more importantly) spiritual fasting. In other words, we should develop a habit of fasting not just from food, but from other things that stand in the way of our communion with God. For example, you can fast from anger so that you can be filled with patience, you can fast from worrying so that you can be filled with trust in God, you can fast from sadness so you can be filled with gratitude, you can even fast from words so that you can be filled with the voice of God in times of silence and contemplation! The amount of growth you experience in Lent will depend upon how much effort you put into opening up your mind and heart to God. Lent is truly about sacrifice, but it involves sacrifices leading to serious benefits. It is not easy, but it is meant to turn your whole world upside down. It is meant to reorder your desires principally toward God so that all your other desires are not only subordinated to God, but also serve as means to glorify him all the more.

Naturally, we all want to take the easier road — the path of least resistance. But we are not called to do this. Christ calls us to take up our crosses and follow him. He calls us to give him our whole lives and trust that he will lead us to happiness. This is the answer to the question posed by this article, “What should I give up for Lent?” *Your whole life*. Offer everything to God so that the Holy Spirit may be fully at work in your life, guiding you in grace and truth. I focused quite a bit on the fasting aspect of Lenten practice, but what about prayer and almsgiving? These too are why we fast! Fasting is negative in nature in the sense that it involves things that you *don’t do* (you avoid or give up certain things physically and spiritually). Prayer and almsgiving, on the other hand, are positive in nature in that it involves *doing something*. Thus, the negative is understood in relation to the positive. Fasting “makes room” or gives occasion to prayer and almsgiving. When you detach yourself from love of money, it gives occasion to giving money away to others in need. When you detach yourself from social media, you give occasion to more time that can be spent in prayer or sharing your time and talent in your parish community, for example.

Ultimately, Lent is an instance of an *imitatio Dei* (an imitation of God) as we imitate Christ himself who fasted in the wilderness for 40 days in preparation for his public ministry. This was not the first time the number 40 is seen in the scriptures. Remember, the Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the desert in search of the Promised Land. We too must we take the next 40 days in “the desert” in preparation for our own participation in the victory of Christ’s Resurrection, leading us to our very own Promised Land, seeing God face to face in Heaven! This will indeed be a spiritually rewarding challenge for us all, but as we focused on in the Christmas season, God is with us. Trust in him. He is all we need. Are you up for the challenge? Let’s do it.