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# Epigraph

## PRAYER FOR A LENTEN JOURNEY

Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God,  
give us miserable ones  
the grace to do for You alone  
what we know you want us to do  
and always to desire what pleases You.

Inwardly cleansed,  
interiorly enlightened  
and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit,  
may we be able to follow  
in the footprints of Your beloved Son,  
our Lord Jesus Christ,  
and, by Your grace alone,  
may we make our way to You,  
Most High,  
Who live and rule  
in perfect Trinity and simple Unity,  
and are glorified  
God almighty,  
forever and ever.

Amen.

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI,  
“A LETTER TO THE ENTIRE ORDER,” 120-121



# Introduction

ALTHOUGH THEY LIVED NEARLY 800 YEARS AGO, St. Francis (1181/2–1226) and St. Clare of Assisi (1194–1253) serve as excellent guides for the modern Lenten journey. Both saints underwent powerful conversion experiences in their lives as they sought the joy and fulfillment that comes from following Christ to the cross and from sharing in the new life of his resurrection. Praying before the crucifix of the dilapidated Church of San Damiano just outside of Assisi, a young Francis heard Christ call him to rebuild his Church. Initially, Francis interpreted this call literally and began rebuilding San Damiano. Eventually Francis understood that Christ was calling him to serve as an agent of reform in the Church in general. Having abandoned the comfortable life of the Italian merchant class, he embraced a life of radical poverty in order to free himself of anything that would hinder him in his quest to live a life of authentic Christian discipleship.

Inspired by the example of Francis and his first followers, Clare, a member of the noble class, left behind everything to establish an expression of the Franciscan vision of Christian discipleship for women. The two saints, who supported each other in their efforts to live humble, simple lives totally dependent on the generosity of God, understood the essence of the paschal mystery: To share in the life of Christ, one also had to die with him. This the saints did through their own lives of poverty, penance, and self-sacrifice. In their existent writings, which are quite meager by modern standards and are composed primarily of prayers, letters, poetry, rules of life, and testaments, Francis and Clare express their vision of the gospel life. Included in these writings are numerous themes extremely ap-

appropriate for the Lenten and Easter seasons: penance, conversion, self-sacrifice, service, embracing the cross, the humility and charity of Christ, joy, new life, and mission. May the words and example of these two great saints inspire us to faithfully follow Christ to the cross so that, together with them, we might experience the joy and new life of Easter.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF LENT

Most Catholics seem to be aware that the forty-day period before the feast of Easter—Lent, which comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning “spring”—is a time marked by particular rituals, such as the reception of ashes on Ash Wednesday or the decision to “give up French fries.” Is Lent broader than just these practices that seem to be left over from another era?

In the first three centuries of Christian experience, preparation for the Easter feast usually covered a period of one or two days, perhaps a week at the most. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. AD 140–202) even speaks of a *forty-hour* preparation for Easter.

The first reference to Lent as a period of forty days’ preparation occurs in the teachings of the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325. By the end of the fourth century, a Lenten period of forty days was established and accepted.

In its early development, Lent quickly became associated with the sacrament of baptism, since Easter was the great baptismal feast. Those who were preparing to be baptized participated in the season of Lent in preparation for the reception of the sacrament of baptism. Eventually, those who were already baptized considered it important to join these candidates preparing for baptism in their preparations for Easter. The customs and practices of Lent as we know them today soon took hold.

## LENT AS A JOURNEY

Lent is often portrayed as a journey, from one point in time to another point in time. The concept of journey is obvious for those experiencing the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), the

program of baptismal preparation conducted in most parishes during the season of Lent.

But Lenten preparation is not limited to those who are preparing to be baptized and join the Church. For many Catholics, Lent is a journey that is measured from Ash Wednesday through Easter Sunday, but more accurately, Lent is measured from Ash Wednesday to the beginning of the period known as the Triduum.

Triduum begins after the Mass on Holy Thursday, continues through Good Friday, and concludes with the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday. Lent officially ends with the proclamation of the *Exsultet*, “Rejoice, O Heavenly Powers,” during the Mass of Holy Saturday.

By whatever yardstick the journey is measured, it is not only the time that is important but the essential experiences of the journey that are necessary for a full appreciation of what is being celebrated.

The Lenten journey is also a process of spiritual growth and, as such, presumes movement from one state of being to another state. For example, some people may find themselves troubled and anxious at the beginning of Lent as a result of a life choice or an unanswered question, and, at the end of Lent, they may fully expect a sense of conversion, a sense of peace, or perhaps simply understanding and acceptance. Therefore, Lent is a movement from one point of view to another or, perhaps, from one interpretation of life to a different interpretation.

Scripture, psalms, prayers, rituals, practices, and penance are the components of the Lenten journey. Each component, tried and tested by years of tradition, is one of the “engines” that drives the season and which brings the weary spiritual traveler to the joys of Easter.

## PENITENTIAL NATURE OF LENT

A popular understanding of Lent is that it is a penitential period of time during which people attempt to become more sensitive to the role of sin in their lives. Lenten sermons will speak of personal sin, coming to an awareness of the sins of others and the effect such sin

might have, and the sin that can be found within our larger society and culture. Awareness of sin, however, is balanced by an emphasis on the love and acceptance that God still has for humanity, despite the sinful condition in which we still find ourselves.

The practice of meditation of the Passion of the Lord, his suffering and his death, is also seen as part of the penitential experience of Lent. There is also a traditional concern for the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation during Lent. Originally, the sacrament of reconciliation was celebrated before Lent began. The penance was imposed on Ash Wednesday and performed during the entire forty-day period.

### SUMMONS TO PENITENTIAL LIVING

“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14–15). This call to conversion announces the solemn opening of Lent. Participants are marked with ashes, and the words, “Repent, and believe in the good news,” are prayed. This blessing is understood as a personal acceptance of the desire to take on the life of penance for the sake of the gospel.

The example of Jesus in the desert for forty days—a time during which he fasted and prayed—is imitated. It is time to center attention on conversion. During Lent, the expectation is to examine our lives and, through the practice of prayer, fasting, and works of charity, seek to conform our lives to Christ’s. For some, this conversion will be a turning from sin to grace. For others, it will be a gracious turning toward the mystery of God in Christ. Whatever the pattern chosen by a particular pilgrim for an observance of Lent, it is hoped that this book will provide a useful support in the effort.



PART I



READINGS *for*  
LENT



*Joining Francis at the Cross:  
The Beginning of Our Lenten Journey*

Most High,  
glorious God,  
enlighten the darkness of my heart  
and give me  
true faith,  
certain hope,  
and perfect charity,  
sense and knowledge,  
Lord,  
that I may carry out  
Your holy and true command.

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI,  
“THE PRAYER BEFORE THE CRUCIFIX,” 40

## GOING INTO THE WILDERNESS

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.*

MATTHEW 4:1–2

## PRAYER

Lord, I ask that you accompany me on my Lenten journey. Open my heart to your will for me. May the journey lead me to soul searching and conversion so that I might experience a deeper relationship with you when I arrive at the celebration of Easter joy.

## LENTEN ACTION

Take five extra minutes to pray before a crucifix. What is it that Christ wills for you this Lenten season? Write down three ways that you might become a more faithful follower of Christ. Keep the list in this book for review throughout the season.

