

Lent, of course, is a time of penance and prayer—a time when we will turn our hearts back to God. As a special *season of opportunity*, we hope, all our good efforts will focus our hearts and souls, drawing us closer to God and preparing us for the great feast of Easter. It all begins today with the *sign of the cross*, marked with ashes on our foreheads. It is a way of saying “We are dust. We are sinners. We need repentance.”

Lent is a time to examine our hearts to discover the ways that we have strayed from our heavenly Father. Through the Prophet Joel, the Lord calls upon us to *return to Him with all our hearts*, with fasting, and prayer. He calls us for a *true repentance* and tells us to split apart not our clothing, but our hearts. In the Old Testament, people tore their garments as a sign of repentance – but oftentimes it remained merely an external sign, without any genuine repentance; their hearts would not change, and they would not let go of their worldly ways to embrace holy ways.

For example, you might be nurturing a grudge against someone. Maybe you are struggling with a habitual sin. Maybe you tend to respond to a loved one unkindly or sarcastically. Whatever the case, your heavenly father is always looking for your return. He will never force you, but he longs to see you come back to Him. Clearly, Jesus very strictly *warns us against hypocrisy* in practicing our works of piety. He reminds us that our Lenten efforts are to be seen by God; and are not meant to impress our neighbors.

Lent is also known as a time to give up. It is a bit of an echo of the sin of pride to think that whatever I give up makes or breaks the Lenten season. Anything we give up is but a tiny effort in comparison to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Whatever we give up, if it is a regular reminder of the mystery of the cross, then it is an experience of humility and a worthy reflection on why we give up things in the first place. So, too, its important to remember that the disciplines of Lent do not cause Easter. Like a tripod, fasting, almsgiving and prayer are not repayments for what Jesus has done for us. Rather, they are reminders of the *restorative grace* given to us when we are

open to receiving them.

It is good-old Lenten practice to abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent. Especially Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of abstinence from meat as well as fasting. Additionally, to give up something for Lent is part of fasting. Though it may seem like a token gesture, it is an easy reminder of a deeper reflection on the mysteries of our faith.

Pope Francis says: “Eat whatever you want for Easter, knowing that the sacrifice is not in the stomach, but in the heart. Some may refrain from eating meat during lent, but always complain and criticize other people’s lives; a good beef stew will not make you a bad person, just like a fish fillet will not make you a saint. It’s more important to have a deeper relationship with God through better treatment of others. Therefore, In Lent, let us be less arrogant but more humble at heart”.

So, today, as we begin the Holy Season of Lent with the sign of ashes, a communal and visible sign of repentance, let us begin it in a penitential frame of mind, seeking out sin and disruption in our lives and replacing these things with a constant dependence on God and His grace. Let us come to the Lord today with a humble heart, acknowledge our sinfulness, and implore, “Be Merciful to me, O Lord, For I Have Sinned.” Let us approach Lent, not with trepidation and fear, but rather with joy. Let us rejoice in our gracious God, who desires not the destruction of the sinner, but his/her redemption. And this is the Good News for us as we begin the day of this most sacred season!

Do You Want To Fast This Lent? In the words of Pope Francis:

Let us fast from hurting words and say kind words.

Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude. Fast from anger and be filled with patience. Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope. Fast from worries and have trust in God. Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity. Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy. Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others. Fast from grudges and be reconciled. Fast from words and be silent so you can listen. Amen