

Experiencing Lent at Every Age: A Developmental Guide to Lenten Practices

by Dr. Joseph D. White

In the Catholic Church, Lent is a very special season of “getting ready.” We are called during this time to make ourselves ready to celebrate the greatest mystery of our faith – the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because this mystery is so central to our faith, it’s important that this special time of year be accessible to Catholics of all ages.

Lent is also a time when we are called to stop and allow the Christian mystery to touch our daily lives once again. It’s easy for us to get into our everyday routines and forget that Christianity is not just about what we do on Sunday mornings, but how we live each moment. Nowhere is this more important than at home with our family- the domestic Church.

A proper experience of Lent in the home depends upon the ages and developmental levels of each family member, but centers around three basic Christian practices – prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The following is an age-by-age guide to celebrating Lent at home:

Preschool-age children (0-5):

Prayer: This is a good time to renew our commitment to daily family prayer. We know that we should pray together regularly as a family, but we often let our hectic schedules get in the way of regular family prayer. For preschool-age children, short and simple prayers are best. Because prayer is conversation with God, we want children to understand what they are praying and mean what they pray. The sign of the cross and other short simple prayers are a good start for children this age. We also want to assist them in praying in their own words. Creating a simple family altar with a few sacred items such as a crucifix (nothing too gory for children this age), a candle and a few other sacred objects can provide a focal point for family prayer where children can visit each day and say, “I love you, Jesus.”

Fasting: Preschool-age children are not required to fast, but they might benefit from the experience of the transition between scaled-down family meals and celebrations during Lent and the more festive season of Easter. Use Lent as a time to plan more simple meals and family activities – for example, a soup and salad dinner and family game night, versus dinner at a restaurant and a family outing.

Almsgiving: Because children this age are very concrete and need to experience something to understand it well, the meaning of giving money can sometimes be lost on them (and besides, they can’t do much to earn money anyway). For this reason, simple acts of service like visiting a home-bound family member or drawing pictures for a teacher or family friend can help the preschooler have some experience of giving to others.

Elementary School age children (6-12):

Prayer: A mealtime prayer or Scripture can help children this age experience this aspect of Lent. Allowing children a turn to lead the family in prayer can be a good way to engage children. Many parishes and dioceses distribute Lenten prayers for before and after meals, and others are available online.

Fasting: While fasting is not a requirement for children this age, it is good for them to begin to experience “giving something up” for the good of someone else. For example, a child who usually gets candy or a treat when shopping or going out to eat can be encouraged to forego that special treat and donate the money to the poor (or put it in a Lenten offering box).

Almsgiving: Parents may wish to consider offering children this age odd jobs they can use to earn extra money to donate to the poor. Or better yet, children could use their earnings to purchase canned goods to donate to local food pantries, many of which experience decreased donations during this season of the year.

Teens (13-18):

Prayer: Encourage teens to keep a prayer journal during Lent, either in written form, or online (e.g., a Facebook entry with one thing they are thankful for each day of Lent). Parents might also wish to encourage teens to take a leadership role in preparing prayer experiences for the family. Also, consider attending Stations of the Cross on Fridays of Lent.

Fasting: Teens ages 14 and up have reached the age in which they are asked to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all Fridays of Lent. Those 18 and older are also asked to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. In addition to these disciplines, encourage your teen to think creatively, and to give up something that truly is a sacrifice, and also to make a commitment they can uphold. Self-sacrifice is sometimes frowned upon in contemporary popular culture, but the self-discipline that is gained by practicing delay of gratification is a valuable asset in achieving most anything worthwhile.

Almsgiving: Encourage your teen to put aside a portion of his or her allowance (or earnings for a part-time job) to a charity or cause about which he or she feels passionate. Teens are also sometimes able to volunteer their time and talents to assist others. Depending on your teen’s interests and abilities, a gift of service would be another way to experience this season.

No matter what our age, Lent is an important time to re-focus, to prepare to grow in new ways as we experience the message and meaning of our Faith. May God bless you and your family as you keep this important season in the life of our Church.

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