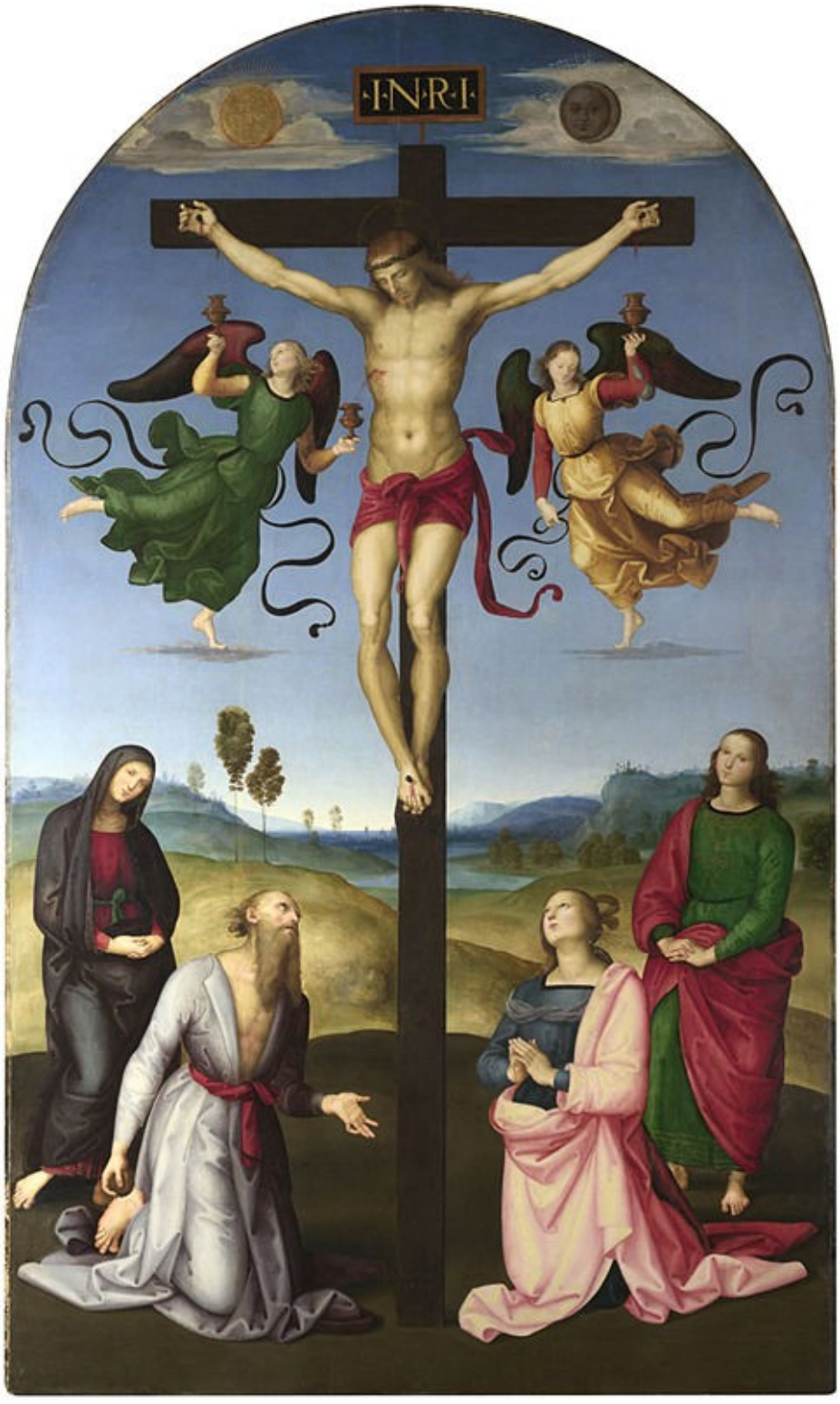


# A Little Guide to a Great Lent

Fr Mark Schultz

# I. AN INTRODUCTION

## What is Lent?

Lent is a penitential season of the church year that lasts from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday (inclusive) and that's meant as a time of preparation for Easter. In Latin, it's called Quadragesima.

## Quadra-what?

Quadragesima. It means (roughly) 40. It comes from the fact that there are 40 days of Lent.

## Um. Okay. Except that doesn't make sense. Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday is 46 days.

Right! Only 6 of those days don't count. They're Sundays, and since every Sunday is a mini Easter, the Sundays are considered *in the season* of Lent, but not *of the season* of Lent.

## Okay. So what does Lent mean, anyway?

It's an old English word that means "Springtime." Generally, the Vernal Equinox will fall sometime during Lent, which means at least some portion of Lent will always occur in the springtime.

# II. THE COLOR OF THE SEASON

## Every liturgical season has a color, right? So what's the color of Lent?

Oh golly! You'd think there were easy answers to such a question! It's complicated.

## Why does that not surprise me in a world where 46 actually equals 40.

If you think the church's math is weird now, wait 'til we get to talking about the Trinity. But anyway, here's the thing: for most of Lent, the color is purple or violet.

## Which means…

Royalty! But also penitence.

## Confusing!

Well…purple is the color of royalty from ancient times, but we also believe that Christ's kingship is revealed most fully in his Passion and Crucifixion. Some of our old hymns speak of Jesus "reigning from the tree." When Jesus was being ridiculed by the Roman guards, they clothed him with a purple garment (to mock him) and then beat him. So purple reminds us that it was for our sins that Jesus suffered for us, and that his suffering for us, his love for us, was a self-giving that we often understand as sacrificial: Jesus' self-giving makes us holy. And it's this sacrificial giving that shows us the true nature of Jesus' royal authority. It's also this sacrificial self-giving that requires of us a

response. And our first response, so the church teaches, is penitence. So purple=royalty=sacrifice=self-giving=a-response-that-looks-like-penitence.

## So yeah the church is really weird about math.

Yes…in part because the church isn't really about math problems. But that's a conversation for a different day.

## So getting back on track: I take it purple isn't the only color.

Nope! One Sunday, for instance, is rose-colored!

## What?

Yep! We'll get into that a little later. For now, though, let's talk about the Lenten Array.

## Yes, please, talk about the Lenten Array. (What's a Lenten Array?)

In some places, particularly in England in older times, the "color" of Lent was the Lenten Array. The vestments were made of unbleached linen or rough unbleached silk, made to look like sackcloth

which, in ancient times, was what people wore when they were being penitential. The unbleached linen was then set off by red, black and white fringe or design elements, and the altar hangings were often decorated not with embroideries but with red or black stamps that depicted the instruments of the passion, also called the Arma Christi, the Arms of Christ (that's where "Array" comes from in Lenten Array—a displays of arms).

## What are the Arms of Christ?

Well, there are lots of them. And they're depictions of the things Jesus encountered during his suffering and death, also called The Instruments of the Passion. They include things like a flail, 3 nails, a crown of thorns, a spear, 30 pieces of silver, a mocking face, pincers/tongs, things like that.

## Why are they called Arms?

Because it's an old word for "weapons." Even though these things were used to shame, humiliate, and injure Jesus, he used them as weapons to defeat sin, death and the devil. He transformed his shame into glory.

## Okay. So you can use either purple/violet or the array.

Yes. But there's more.

## Of course there is.

On Passion Sunday (in some places the Fifth Sunday in Lent, in others the Sixth which is also called Palm Sunday or the Sunday of the Passion), the color is often red or "oxblood" for the Passion of Jesus.

## Passion Sunday?

We'll get to that. On Maundy Thursday, the color could be white. On Good Friday, the color could be red or black, and at the Easter Vigil, the color would often start off as either red or purple and change to white.

## Change like magically change?

No! At a certain part of the service (at the official start of Easter!), the sacred ministers would change their vestments to the new color, Alleluias would be sung and bells rung!

## I hope we get back to some of those words and days and things you just mentioned.

We will.

# III. VEILING

## But before we go on…what about veiling?

Right! If using the array, all the images and crosses and crucifixes in the church are veiled at the start of Lent, and if you're using purple/violet, they often get veiled before Passion Sunday (in some places, before Palm Sunday, in others, before the last three days of Lent; in some places, crosses and crucifixes will be veiled early on, images later in the season). All the veils come down very dramatically at the Easter Vigil when Easter officially starts, though in some places where the array is used, there's a particularly large veil that covers a large crucifix, flanked by Mary and John, that is usually prominently placed on a beam at the entrance of the sanctuary or chancel, where the altar is. That arrangement is typically called a "Rood" (which comes from an old English word which means "crucifix") and the veil is called a Rood Veil. That particular veil would come down on Palm Sunday. More on that later. In the meantime, you can see here an image of a Rood Veil (in the Lenten Array style) coming down on Palm Sunday (this is from Saint Mary's Primrose Hill in London).

## What does veiling mean?

Two things, really: it's a sign of sorrow and penitence, and it's also a way of making the church look more austere, different, so that when the veils are lifted, everything suddenly looks more bright and festive and multi-dimensional again!

# IV. PENITENCE

## So, in some ways, Lent sounds like a more complicated version of Advent. I mean: Aren't the colors the same? And don't they both skip the Gloria (Glory to God in the Highest)?

Yeah, there are definitely similarities in both Advent and Lent—the color of both can be purple, and we don't say the Gloria. Not saying the Gloria is definitely part of the penitential feeling of the seasons, though you could make the argument that Advent skips the Gloria because it's the song of the angels at Christmas (and we've not gotten to Christmas yet when we're in Advent), while Lent skips the Gloria because, well, it's so joyful. But really, here's the thing: the church has a habit of reverting to more ancient practices during penitential seasons and occasions, perhaps because the ancient practices are simpler and tend to appear more austere…and the Gloria wasn't introduced into the liturgical life of the church until around the 4th century, and even then it took a few more centuries (like six or seven!) for it to become a universally common thing on Sundays. It's probably for this reason, too, that in many churches, instead of a blessing at the end of the Eucharist, a solemn "Prayer Over the People" is prayed.

## Is there a difference between the penitential qualities of Advent and Lent? What's different about Lent being penitential?

A couple things. Lent is actually the pattern for Advent, so that's another reason why sometimes they seem so similar. Advent prepares for the Second Coming of Jesus at the End of the World and the First Coming of Jesus at Christmas; Lent prepares for Easter, when Jesus rose again from the dead. Penitence is prescribed for both seasons, Advent and Lent, but Lent's penitence also has a dimension of sharing in Jesus' sufferings. And there's more…

## Of course there is.

In olden days, Lent was a time when people prepared for Baptism and Confirmation which would both take place at the Great Vigil of Easter. It was also a time when people who had committed crimes, "notorious sins," and other acts that broke community were ritually separated from the fellowship of the church and performed public penance before being ritually re-admitted to the church on Maundy Thursday. These days, that baptismal preparation and that penitential preparation are suggested as good ways for everybody to prepare for Easter.

## What really does penitential preparation mean?

Penitence is an interior disposition of the soul that is characterized by sorrow for sin and a yearning for God's mercy. A penitential practice is a practice that's meant to lead us to be sorrowful for sin, a practice that's meant to help us be honest with ourselves about our sinfulness so that we can approach God for the grace and mercy we need to amend our lives and live according to God's will for us. If we're not honest with ourselves about who we are, we can't bring all of ourselves (including our sin) to God in order to be transformed, renewed, and given new life. Penitential preparation in Lent means engaging in a penitential practice to prepare our hearts and souls and bodies for the glories of Easter.

## Okay, I get it. But say more.

Here's another way of approaching penitential preparation. People will take on a discipline in Lent that will remind them that their life needs to be oriented to God…and that very often (which is to say, most of the time), we're completely *dis*oriented. Some disciplines include taking on a prayer practice (like praying the Anglican or Dominican Rosaries or committing to the Daily Office), some disciplines include something penitential like fasting and/or abstinence, some include making a rule of life that might include a variety of disciplines, and some rules include seeing a priest for confession at least once before Easter.

## Oh whoa there. You used a lot of words. Please define them!

Sure!

A **discipline** is a practice that helps us deepen our discipleship to Jesus. It helps to regulate our lives, which is to say, it helps to make them regular in our devotion. Some disciplines include a regular practice of scripture reading or spiritual reading, and all ought to include a practice of prayer (of which there are many kinds and methods).

**Prayer** is a means of communion with God. We often think it's a one-way street: we talk, God listens. But really, prayer is a relationship, not a monologue—and we're meant to pay attention in prayer to what God might be speaking in and to our hearts. Prayer can be discursive (involving words or a thinking-through of something), or it can be quiet (involving silence) or it can involve both words and silence (as in centering prayer which uses a word from scripture to help redirect the mind to silence when the mind wanders). Free conversation with God is sometimes called colloquy—it's a way of just talking with God as you would with a friend, and then entering into silence to listen for God, to the movements of your soul in which God is both acting and speaking. Saint Augustine called prayer a School of Desire. We're meant to bring our desires to God in prayer and allow God, through prayer, by grace, to give us God's own desires, to teach us what we ought to be desiring. It's important that whatever discipline we take on in Lent, prayer be involved.

**To fast** usually means to not eat. But it's more than just skipping a meal or two. Fasting is related to sacrifice—what it means to give something up in imitation of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and all that he gave up for love of us. Also, a fast is not a hunger strike! It's meant to make us more keenly aware of what we receive, accept, put into our minds and bodies.

The idea is that through the discipline of the fast (and through the discipline of prayer that accompanies it), we can understand what it is that we're really hungry for and what it is that often

prevents us from receiving the nourishment we need and for which we most deeply yearn. Hopefully through the practice of this discipline, we discover our hunger for justice, for faith, for meaning, for truth, for righteousness, for real love, for God; and we come to recognize our hunger as an invitation to greater engagement with the world and with our faith as we take our stand in solidarity with those who hunger (for food, for justice, for righteousness, for God). The fast is meant to empty us so that we can be filled with God's grace, God's presence, God's word to us, so that whatever we do, it's God's doing in us.

Also, not every fast need be a food fast (we'll talk a bit about that below)! The true fast toward which whatever discipline in which we engage is meant to lead us is that we abstain from every form of evil and wickedness, from hatred and malice and inordinate desire, from oppression and injustice, from anything that prevents us from loving as we are called to love or doing the good that we're called to do, so that we may, by God's indwelling grace, do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

**Abstinence** means to avoid consuming a particular food. Very often, folks abstain from meat on Fridays throughout the year, and especially in Lent (and sometimes even Wednesdays in Lent, too). Fasting and abstaining often go together…which means that when we take food during our fast, we avoid those foods from which we're abstaining.

Regarding the **Daily Office** and the **Anglican and Dominican Rosaries**:

> The Office was a way of sanctifying the time and inculcating a pattern of constant prayer, as Saint Paul tells us: pray without ceasing (I Thessalonians 5:17). It comes from the round of prayers and prayer times practiced in the temple and the synagogue. The Office (which comes from the Latin word *officium* meaning "duty" or "service") developed into a series of seven "hours" of prayer spaced throughout the day (Psalm 119:164—"Seven times a day do I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments") and eventually it was prayed almost exclusively by monks and nuns (there were popular forms of the office that were much simplified, like the Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary or the Hours of the Cross that formed the core of the medieval Books of Hours). Praying the Psalms is the real heart of the office. In the English Reformation, Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer simplified the Office by combining features of the seven hours into two similarly structured and vastly simplified hours—Morning Prayer / Mattins and Evening Prayer / Evensong. In this way, a largely monastic practice was popularized and made available to everyone. The Psalms are still the heart of the office, and there are lengthy readings from Scripture upon which to meditate.
>
> The Dominican Rosary is the familiar rosary (called Dominican because it was popularized by Saint Dominic) that includes repetitions of the Hail Mary prayer. There are three sets of five mysteries to meditate on in the Rosary: Joyful (relating to Jesus birth), Sorrowful (relating to Jesus' cross and passion) and Glorious (relating to Jesus' resurrection, Pentecost, and beyond). For each of the five mysteries in the three sets, devotees say ten Hail Marys, which means the Hail Mary gets said 150 times over the course of the fifteen Mysteries. Why is that important? Well, because there are 150 Psalms…it's pretty clear the Dominican Rosary developed as a way for people (particularly folks who may not be able to read or have access to a printed Psalter) to "pray the Psalms" along with the monks and nuns who prayed the Office!

The Anglican Rosary is a little different: it features 33 beads (one for each year of Jesus' life), divided into four groups of seven (called weeks), four beads separating the weeks (called the cruciform beads because they form a cross), and what's called an Invitatory bead (which starts things off, invites us into prayer). There's also often a cross attached to the beads on which a prayer is said. There are no set prayers for the Anglican Rosary (though the Jesus Prayer—Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner—is a popular choice for the week beads) but you can see from its pattern that it's meant to be a way of sanctifying the time…which refers it, once again, to the Office!

Want more info on these practices? Talk to a priest or a friend you know who engages in them, and check out the Book of Common Prayer for more info on the Office!

**A rule** is often a series of disciplines, considered in aggregate, that we commit to keeping and that is meant to govern/regulate our life. The word "rule," in fact, translates the Latin *regula* which means…to make regular! A rule is meant to articulate a standard to which our life and our prayer (because really our life *is* our prayer and vice versa) can reasonably conform. A rule is not a law. It's a guide, not a taskmaster. We'll talk more about all this when we talk later about taking on a fast.

## Okay. Will all those things make me good or holy?

No! Not at all! God's the only one who makes people holy, and that's by grace.

## So why bother?

Because these practices of the faith can help to open us out to the grace that God always desires to give us, and are ways by which we respond to the grace God has already given. They don't make us holy, but they put us in touch with what it might mean to live holy lives, and in the practicing of these disciplines, we often discover that grace is working in us to form us more closely into a people of deeper faith, hope, and love, into a people who are more and more available to the grace God longs to give. This is what it means to actually practice the faith.

## Got it. Thanks. That actually sounds like something I'd like to do.

Great!…but just so we're clear, this is less about you doing something, and more about engaging in practices that allow God to do more in you!

## Okay, fine, yeah, so technical.

It's the pastoral theologian in me. Sorry (also not sorry).

## Seriously, though, I'm feeling drawn to fast, to practice something…and drawn, too, to practice it with my family/community. Do you have tips?

Sure! Here are some things to consider!

1: Here's what the church has anciently suggested for a Lenten fast: every day a light breakfast, a full meal, and half a meal and abstaining from meat on Fridays and Wednesdays. That's it. But that having been said…

2: Fasting from food isn't for everyone, nor should it be! It might not be healthy for especially young children and elderly folks to fast. It's not healthy for folks who are ill to fast. It's likely not healthy for folks who do very strenuous labor to fast. And it's probably not a good idea for folks with an eating disorder to fast. So given your and your family's needs, fasting from food may be either wildly impractical or, again, unhealthy! But fasting isn't the be-all end-all of Lenten disciplines. What's important is engaging in a practice that moves us outside of ourselves and towards God and our neighbor. Maybe there are fewer desserts after dinner. Sure. But maybe instead there's an hour less screen time on one or more days. What else can happen in that hour?!?? The question to ask ourselves in discerning our Lenten discipline is: what will draw me closer to God, what will help me to fall more deeply in love with Jesus Christ, what will lead me to ask myself, "For what do I truly hunger? What will truly nourish me?"

3: Fasting can involve adding an extra discipline. If the real fast is fasting from evil, what practices can we engage in together that help us do that? Maybe a family prayer time would be helpful, or scripture reading, or volunteering together. So many possibilities!

4: Whatever the discipline, it's important that it be regular. It needn't be daily! But it should be regular. Are you giving up screen time? Maybe that happens every Thursday from 6 to 7. Are you volunteering somewhere? Maybe that happens every Saturday. Are you re-committing to attending worship together on Sundays (what a great idea!)? Well there you go! That's every Sunday!

5: If you're looking for a family or community discipline, whatever it is, it's important that everyone in the family/community practice it. It's nice to have individual disciplines for Lent—they can be incredibly important! But taking on a discipline you wouldn't choose is also important—it means it's not about us anymore, but about our family, our community; it means (happily!) we may need to make our egos smaller. For this reason, it's helpful if everyone in the family/community meet together to talk about what the fast means and decide together on what the family will be doing.

6: Whatever your rule or discipline or fast, chances are good that you'll break it at some point, more likely at many points. That's okay! It turns out breaking the rule is just an organic part of what it means to keep the rule. It's simply not the case that even a frequently broken rule is a useless rule—that's not how rules work. It's only the broken and then *abandoned* rule that's not useful. We speak of *keeping* a rule, not *obeying* it. A rule's efficacy and virtue is revealed in the keeping of it, even in the breach: you can still keep a broken rule! At this point, it's probably important to remember: your Lenten discipline won't save your soul; whatever good thing you do, you can't save your soul. Jesus does that and he does it as a free gift of his loving grace. So if your Lenten rule is broken, that's okay! Maybe there's something in *why* it was broken that can help you understand what's needed to keep the rule better. But that's why even breaks in the rule are important: they're opportunities for reflection, not self-flagellation. In short, we're talking about keeping a rule, not following a law. A broken law demands justice. A broken rule invites reflection. That being said…

7: It may be important to adjust your discipline if you find you can't actually follow it. It's better to have a rule you can actually follow, however "light" it might seem, rather than one you abandon because it's impossible to keep!

8: It's never too late to start the fast! For any number of reasons, you may be getting around to addressing your Lenten discipline after Ash Wednesday. That's okay! Because guess what: you're still addressing your discipline, and that's what's important! Don't get discouraged by "late" starts. You're not late. You're right on time!

9: Just a reminder: whatever your rule, whatever your discipline, whatever your fast, make sure it includes prayer. Perhaps there are ways it can naturally lead to prayer: like, "I'm fasting, and I'm hungry. Maybe I can use my hunger as a goad to prayer!" Or perhaps your discipline is all about prayer! Though here's the secret of secrets when it comes to rules, discipline, and fasting: it's always about prayer. Even when it doesn't seem to be, it's all about prayer.

10: Remember: Sundays are never fast days!

If you want to talk about any of this or brainstorm about how you and/or your family can take on a Lenten discipline, talk to a priest!

## Okay, thanks for that! So I have some ideas about what it might mean for me to be a better person. I have some vices I'd like to give up, and there are a few things I'd like to take on as healthy habits, like eating better and waking up earlier. Is Lent a good time for doing/starting all of that?

Well…the easiest answer is maybe.

## That doesn't help.

I know. But here's why. It's great that you want to give up vices—it's more than great: it's really really important. And the fact that you recognize that giving up a vice is actually a good thing and you *want* to do it means it's probably a desire given to you by God, so you should definitely definitely pray for grace to do it! Taking on a discipline in which giving up vice is a part is important!

And…let's be honest here, we're called to give up our vices every day. This can't just be a Lenten thing for you. You're going to be practicing this discipline for the rest of your life. So let's be clear: don't wait 'til Lent to give up vices, but if you're going to use Lent as a time to try to give up vices (which is great!), you don't get to take up the vices again when Lent is over. And whatever vice you're trying to give up, you won't get particularly far without prayer and repentance—those things will also need to form a part of your discipline.

Also, while giving up a vice or adopting some good habit or other can be really good and edifying, we're not doing these things in Lent so we'll be better people. I know, I know, that sounds weird. We're doing these things because we want grace to draw us closer to God—we're trying to become more available to grace so grace can do its work in us. We're doing these things because we want to grow in faith, hope and love, in greater relationship with God and our neighbor. The upshot is these practices will likely make us better people. But the goal is falling more deeply in love with

Jesus and being able to receive the grace God always wants to give us. This isn't about self-help. This isn't about becoming a more productive citizen or worker or whatever. This is about grace and relationship.

So the bottom line is this: whatever discipline you take up in Lent, you're taking it up because you want to love God and your neighbor, and that desire in you is actually given to you by God, and you're being drawn to respond. For instance, let's say you want to start getting up earlier: get up earlier so you can use the extra time to pray and meditate and discern how God is leading you to love more fully throughout the course of the day! So whatever your discipline is, it should include prayer and repentance.

## Wow. So serious.

Yeah, well…love is serious business. It's also joyful business. It's also what you were meant for.

## Okay. I think I understand.

Good!

# V. MOVEMENT OF THE SEASON

## 1. GESIMA-TIDE

### But changing the subject just slightly…you mentioned earlier all these different parts of Lent and stuff about a Great Vigil. Talk about that stuff, please.

Glad you asked! We'll go step by step, day by day. First, there's Gesima-tide.

### Is that related to the Quadra Latin word thing?

Yes! Gesima-tide is an old season of the church (that's often ignored these days for…well I'm sure there are good reasons because I want to think good things of people). It started with Septuagesima, the third Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Septuagesima means 70, and the idea was that there was a symbolic 70 days before Easter. The next Sunday was Sexagesima (a symbolic 60 days to Easter) and then Quinquagesima (50). Gesima-tide was a way for the church to say: "Lent is coming! Now's the time to think about how we might be called to prepare for Easter during Lent!"

### Wait…we're not even talking about Lent yet?

I mean…no, not really. Probably one of the reasons why Gesima-tide was ignored in more recent revisions of the prayerbook, say, is because it felt like a little Lent, like a preparation for a preparation for Easter. Which sounds odd. Also, the liturgical color was violet/purple, and in some places the Alleluias were buried in a ceremony that looked very much like a funeral on the Saturday before Septuagesima…which made it all seem like just more Lent.

### Did you say, "Burying the Alleluias"?

Yeah. We'll get to that.

### Okay. Go on.

But one of the other reasons why Gesima-tide was actually important was because it was also carnival season.

### I like carnivals!

Who doesn't? The word "carnival" comes from Latin and means something like, "Goodbye, meat!" The idea behind the carnival season was that you got out of your system (and household) anything that might prevent you from keeping your fast in Lent (including meat and, in some places, dairy products)…to exhaust, in some ways, the flesh (the "carn" in "carnival" is from the Latin word "carne" which means "flesh"). Sometimes the parties in carnival got really raucous, which wasn't necessarily as fun as anyone expected (nor what the Church intended or desired). But even that sense of not-as-fun-as-we-thought pitched folks toward Lent and what Lent might really be about. Either way, the parties culminated with a big bash that in some places was called "Mardi Gras" or "Fat Tuesday" or "Shrove Tuesday," the day before Ash Wednesday.

# 2. SHROVE TUESDAY

## What is a shrove and why is there a Tuesday for shroves?

It sounds like it should be a little furry creature, doesn't it? But it's not.

## Awww. I has hoping…

Nope! It's the past tense of an old word that means, "to receive forgiveness." The idea is that instead of partying, you might want to go to confession and receive pardon before Lent begins on Ash Wednesday.

## Confession? You mentioned that earlier. Do we do that?

Absolutely! There's an order for it in the Book of Common Prayer!

## Really? Why? I thought the Reformation didn't like that stuff.

The Reformation didn't like a lot of stuff…but most of the things it didn't like were abuses or misunderstandings of things. Many of the Reformers actually have a lot of great things to say about private confession, in part because acknowledging our sins before God is essential and in part because receiving counsel and compassion from someone when we're at our most vulnerable, and receiving from that person a word of comfort, absolution and remission of our sins…well there are few words to describe it, but "holy" is certainly one of them. As Anglicans, we understand that confession isn't about a legal or juridical proceeding (which is how some folks are led to think about confession), but about acknowledging that a relationship has been impaired and we're looking for healing. Interested in learning more? Schedule time with a priest to talk about confession, or, even better, schedule time to make your confession!

## So I should make my confession on Shrove Tuesday.

You can, certainly. As Queen Elizabeth I is reported to have said, "All may, none must, some should."

## And that's all Shrove Tuesday is about.

Well, no. The remnants of that carnival spirit we talked about are still alive in many places. Some churches celebrate a Mardi Gras pancake supper!

## That sounds very…um…tame?

Well, yeah, sure, it is in some ways. But the point anciently was to exhaust the animal fat you might have stored up in your home (so you wouldn't be tempted to use it) with a big splurgy decadent supper…and things like pancakes were not only a nice way to use up oil and fat to cook them, but became a symbol of the splurgy decadence. In many places nowadays, this is also the time when the Alleluia (written on paper or some other surface) is buried or hidden—a ritual sign that, in our Lenten liturgies, the word will not be sung or spoken.

The dried out blessed palms from the previous Palm Sunday are also burned on Mardi Gras to make ashes for Ash Wednesday. This provides a sense of continuity from one year to the next, from one celebration to the next. It's also an amazing reminder that the joys of this world can often easily turn to ash.

## That's sad.

Oh, but it gets better!

## Better in a good way or…

Better in a more meaningful way!

# 3. ASH WEDNESDAY

## Yeah, I thought you might be the sort of person who wouldn't actually use that word correctly. So explain. Are we at Ash Wednesday yet?

Yes! So on Ash Wednesday, we're invited to keep a holy Lent, to engage in practices to prepare us for Easter, and to remember how much we rely on the grace and goodness of God for everything in our lives. Ashes are a very old sign of penitence and contrition: people used to wear sackcloth and pour ashes on themselves when they were repenting. We receive a cross, made of ashes, drawn on our foreheads, and when it's put there, the minister says, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return."

## Again…sad.

Not really! It's just fact. One day, we're going to die. Are we ready for it? Do we understand our death as something to be feared? Do we understand it as a doorway to a new life? What makes the shift from fear to hopefulness real or actual? In part, it's knowing that all of our times are in God's hands, all our life, even our death. And since God has redeemed all of us, every part of us, then even our deaths become something new in the light of redemption, the light of Easter, in the wounded hands of our merciful God. God's able to hold our lives and our deaths and make of both of them things of meaning and wonder. And the penitential practices of Lent—by leading us to be more honest about who we are as fallen humans, as death-bound sinners, and more honest, too, about who God is as One who is just and merciful and loving and life-giving—these practices help us understand our life and death more fully, help us to understand what Life really means, what

Living really is, and helps us to grow in the love and knowledge of God more deeply. Even in the ashes of Ash Wednesday, Lent helps us to become more fully alive by helping us become more available to God! And as Saint Irenaeus has said, the glory of God is a human being fully alive.

## Okay…so not sad.

Not at all! When Jesus taught us about what it means to fast and engage in penitential practices, he told us that we ought not to see these things as sad-making things at all, but to go about them cheerfully! While in the midst of life we may indeed be in death, there is nonetheless one alive in us who is life itself: and that's Jesus!

## Okay. So Ash Wednesday. Then what.

Lent starts with Ash Wednesday, and then there's the First Sunday of Lent (called Quadragesima).

# 4. QUADRAGESIMA, LAETARE, AND THE SUNDAYS IN LENT

## Right! Now I get it…that word, I mean. Quadra…

…-gesima. Yes.

## Which means "40" which means all-the-days-in-Lent-minus-the-Sundays.

Yes!

## Why 40?

40 is a number used in scripture to signify pilgrimage, journeying, transformation—the journey is usually about a journey into new life. So Noah spent 40 days and nights in the ark during the Great Flood, at the end of which the earth was renewed and refreshed. So the Hebrew peoples journeyed for 40 years before coming to the promised land. So Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai receiving the law. So Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan before the angels came to minister to him and he began his public ministry.

## Do we get angels at the end of Lent?

Maybe. Really, though, we get something much much better.

## What? Tell me!!!

In good time! We haven't gotten there yet.

## Okay, fine. So we talked earlier about some of the changes and different things that happen in Lent (color change, no Gloria or Alleluia). Is anything else different?

In a lot of places, there'll be extra or different devotions offered throughout the week (in addition to some extra emphasis on confession). One of those devotions is called Stations of the Cross.

## I think I've heard of that. But what is it?

It's a way of remembering and walking the Way of the Cross with Jesus. The word "Station" here just refers to a stop along a way, and the way is literally walked through and around a church as people (sometimes alone, but more often in a group) meditate on a series of devotional images in sequence that describe the events immediately leading up to and following the crucifixion: from the sentence Pilate passes on Jesus to his burial in Joseph of Arimathea's sepulcher. At each station, we acclaim "We adore thee, O Christ, and we praise thee, because by thy Holy Cross thou hast redeemed the world." After each acclamation, there's usually a brief meditation, a response, and a prayer, and then sometimes a section from a hymn will be sung as the group moves to the next station. One traditional hymn option has been the *Stabat Mater*, meaning "The Mother Stood". It's a hymn about the sorrows the Virgin Mary experienced as she stood by the cross, sorrows we're invited to bear with her as we walk the way. The title comes from the first verse:

> At the cross her station keeping
> Stood the mournful mother weeping
> Close to Jesus at the last.

The Stations of the Cross can be a powerful way of entering into Lent. One of the things we can discover in the Stations is that the Way of the Cross cuts through every time and space…and through every human heart.

## Wow. I might want to do that!

I hope you will!

## So after Quadragesima, then what?

Then there's eventually a special Sunday called Laetare Sunday.

## So much Latin.

It's great, right?

## Um. Whatever. What's Laetare Sunday?

Do you remember in Advent there was that one Sunday where everyone wore rose vestments?

## You mean what I like to call Pink Advent Sunday Day?

Um. Sure. Only it's rose. In Advent, the Sunday is called Gaudete, which means "Rejoice!" Well, that Sunday is like it is in Advent because, like we said earlier, Lent provides the pattern for Advent. And the Lenten Sunday that corresponds to Gaudete is Laetare.

## Which means…

Rejoice!

## So much Latin.

Right? It's great. Anyway. We wear rose vestments on Laetare Sunday. It's a day when the penitential aspect of things is relaxed just a teensy bit. In some places, the Great Litany is said in procession on the first Sunday of Lent, in other places, the Litany is said on every Sunday in Lent…except Laetare Sunday! Either way, the purple / violet of Lent turns a lighter shade: Rose.

About a thousand years ago, the Pope began a practice of blessing golden roses on this day, and he'd then send these roses to folks he wanted to honor. In England, this Sunday was called "Mothering Sunday." It was a time when folks who worked in big estates returned to their Mother Churches (the churches in which they were baptized and confirmed), which also meant returning to their families, bringing a special kind of cake that they learned how to bake in the estate. It was called a Simnel Cake ("simnel" probably coming from a word like "simila" referring to the good quality flour of which it's made). A Simnel Cake is a kind of rich fruitcake made with a layer of apricot jam and marzipan and topped with marzipan as well. Many of them also feature twelve marzipan balls, one for each of the apostles (including Matthias)! By the by, this is the old tradition behind our contemporary celebration of Mother's Day.

## Okay, but is there more Latin I'll need to know?

Well…yes and no. In olden days, each of the Sundays in Lent had a Latin title—it came from a little verse of scripture at the beginning of Mass that was sung while the altar party (priest, deacon, subdeacon and servers) entered the church and chancel and approached the altar. The little verse was called an Introit, which basically just means, "The Entrance." The Latin name of the Sunday was the first word of the Introit. Here's a list of Sundays, their Latin names, and their Introits.

Lent I:  Invocavit (“He Shall Call”)
Introit: He shall call upon Me, and I will hear him : I will deliver him, and bring him to honor. With long life will I satisfy him. (From Psalm 91)

Lent II: Reminiscere (“Call to Remembrance”)
Introit: Call to remembrance, O Lord, Thy tender mercies : and Thy loving-kindnesses, which have been ever of old. Let not our enemies triumph over us. Deliver us, O God of Israel, out of all our trouble. (From Psalm 25)

Lent III: Oculi (“Eyes”)
Introit: Mine eyes are ever looking unto the Lord; for He shall pluck my feet out of the net. Turn Thee unto me, and have mercy upon me : for I am desolate, and in misery. (From Psalm 25)

Lent IV: Laetare (“Rejoice”)
Introit: Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and gather together, all ye that love the Lord: rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her. (From Isaiah 66)

Lent V: Iudica (“Judge”)
Introit: Give sentence with me, O God, and defend my cause against the ungodly people : O deliver me from the deceitful and wicked man, for Thou art the God of my strength. (From Psalm 43)

# 5. PASSIONTIDE

## That's five Sundays. Aren't there six?

Yes! We'll get to that! Because here's where things get a little more interesting. That last Sunday, the Fifth Sunday in Lent? That Sunday was known as Passion Sunday, which introduced the final two weeks of Lent which were called Passiontide.

## Wait…I thought we were supposed to get rid of our passions and things on Shrove Tuesday.

Yes! But our word "passion" comes from the Latin "passio" which means "to suffer." We call our inordinate affections and sinful desires passions because they cause us to suffer. But the suffering of Jesus on the cross is also called "the Passion." So Passion-tide is meant to orient us to the suffering that Jesus is about to endure for our sake. Remember that in preparation for Passion Sunday, images and crosses in the church are sometimes veiled, particularly in places that use purple / violet for the color of Lent.

# 6. PALM SUNDAY AND HOLY WEEK

## Okay. Then what?

The Sunday after Passion Sunday is called Palm Sunday. Sometimes Palm Sunday is called the Sunday of the Passion because the Passion narrative would be read, but this can get confusing with the previous Sunday being called Passion Sunday in some places. Palm Sunday is its usual name, though.

## That's when we wave palm branches around!

Well. Yeah. And. There's more to it than that. It commemorates the time when Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Passover and prepare for the cross. Many people believed that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem to make a claim to the throne of David: they believed he was the Messiah (the Anointed One), and they believed that his kingdom would overturn the Roman Empire and restore Israel as a free nation. So they celebrated his entry into Jerusalem by strewing his path with leaves and palm branches and shouted out "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord" (Matthew 21:9). It's a similar thing that we say at the Eucharist at

the Sanctus when we say or sing, "Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest!" We're welcoming Christ into the church, the King into his temple, and anticipating his real presence in the Eucharist.

That "Blessed is he" comes from Psalm 118 which is a liturgical Psalm describing a dialogue between the King, the Priests of the Temple, and the People. The King is entering the city as a conqueror and is going to the Temple to offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. When the King approaches the temple, everyone shouts, "Blessed be he that cometh in the Name of the Lord!" (Psalm 118:26). As Jesus enters Jerusalem, he enters as one who has overcome human broken-ness, death and illness, one who has healed, exorcised, restored; he comes as one who has been victorious over the powers of death at work in the world, and the first thing he does is enter the temple!

On Palm Sunday, we play the part of the people welcoming the Lord to the city. We sing the hymn "All Glory, Laud and Honor," and then as we enter the Church together, we remember what Jesus is about to do on the cross, and we might shift to singing:

> Ride on, ride on in majesty!
> In lowly pomp ride on to die;
> bow your meek head to mortal pain,
> then take, O God, your pow'r and reign.

In some places where there's a Rood and it's veiled, the veil dramatically drops during the reading of the Passion, suddenly revealing the scene of the crucifixion, giving us a greater visceral sense of what the serious and somber solemnities of the Week to come is all about.

## Lent seems to be very much about seriousness.

It's true! It's a reminder to get serious about our faith, about where we put our hope, about how we love. It's a call to re-engagement with God and the world that goes all the way back to the prophets.

## You mentioned Holy Week…

Yes! Holy Week is the last week of Lent, and it's the most holy time of the season. Every day of the week has a special name, even if it's only to add "Holy" in front of the day. So there's Holy Monday, Holy Tuesday, Spy Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and finally Holy Saturday and the Great Vigil of Easter.

Those last three days, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday are called the Triduum, which means something like, "The Three" or probably more accurately, "The Triplicity."

## What happens on Spy Wednesday, that sounds neat!

Well…Spy Wednesday is called "Spy" because it's the day we remember that Judas was spying out an opportunity to betray Jesus.

## That's, um, not so neat.

No, but God has a way of transforming our failures into glory.

## Is that all that happens?

In many places, there's a service called Tenebrae that's held on Spy Wednesday. Tenebrae means "Shadows" or perhaps more evocatively, "The Gathering Darkness." The service is an adaptation of how the early-morning offices of the Daily Office were said in monasteries over the course of the Triduum. The service is mostly Psalms and readings from the Book of Lamentations. Lamentations describes the Prophet Jeremiah's sadness at the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple in Jerusalem, and we read it in Holy Week because Jesus identified himself with the Temple in the Gospel of John. At regular points in the Tenebrae service, the lights of a special candelabrum (and often of the church itself) are extinguished until only the light of one candle remains. That last candle, instead of being extinguished, is hidden for a moment, usually behind or near the altar, and then revealed again at the end of the service as a kind of symbolic premonition of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It also serves as a powerful image of Christian hope: no matter how dark it seems to get, Jesus remains the Light of the World.

# 7. THE TRIDUUM: MAUNDY THURSDAY, GOOD FRIDAY, HOLY SATURDAY

## Then what?

Then the Triduum begins. The Triduum is really a single gesture: one service spread out over three days.

First there's Maundy Thursday. On Maundy Thursday we remember 3 things: Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet, the giving of a new commandment (that we love one another as God has loved us), and the Last Supper, which is to say, the Institution of the Eucharist. The word "Maundy" comes from the Latin *mandatum* which means "commandment," referring to the new commandment. The liturgy on Maundy Thursday is really festive and celebratory at first: the Gloria is even sung! The color is festal white! But there are some big differences between Maundy Thursday and any other Feast:

- Foot washing is practiced as a sign of submission to Jesus' words that unless he cleanses us, we aren't really clean, and as a remembrance of Jesus' humble washing of the disciples' feet.

- In places where bells are rung (at the Sanctus and/or the elevations during the Eucharist), sometimes a crotalus is used instead of a bell—a crotalus is a simple hand-held device that looks like a hammer on a hinge that hits a wooden board…and that's precisely what it is: instead of a bell, there's a loud CLACK that sounds both ugly and out of place—and that's intentional.
- Enough of the Eucharistic elements are consecrated for two services. There will be no more Eucharist celebrated until the first Eucharist of Easter at the Great Vigil. The extra Precious Body and Blood aren't placed in the tabernacle, however, but processed in solemn ceremony to a side altar, usually specially decorated to recall the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus and his disciples went after the Last Supper. Here, the Body and Blood are placed on the altar (which is called "the altar of repose") and Jesus is worshiped in the Eucharist.

- At this point, the main altar is stripped (usually to Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"), the church is darkened, and the service ends in silence. The stripping of the altar represents the stripping of Jesus before he was nailed to the cross, the altar being an image of Jesus. In fact, on the top of the altar are five crosses, one on each corner, and one in the center—they represent the five wounds of Jesus. Sometimes during the stripping of the altar, the crosses are ceremonially treated with water and wine to represent the water and blood which flowed from Jesus' side.

- At the end of the liturgy, people are invited to the Altar of Repose to keep vigil. This vigil is in imitation of the vigil Jesus asked the disciples to keep in the garden while he prayed.

]

## And after Maundy Thursday?

It's Good Friday. On Good Friday, we remember the crucifixion of Jesus and, through our liturgy, participate in the events of that awful (which is to say, awesome and awe-inspiring), terrible (which is to say, marvelous) and amazing (which is to say, astonishing) day.

## Why such confusing terms? Why Good for something Dreadful?

Because even on the Cross, even in the midst of all the sin and death and violence we can throw at him, Jesus is working out our redemption. On the cross, Jesus is bearing our sin, destroying it, and performing a work of awesome grace in which the wrath and judgment we might expect from God is turned into sweetness and mercy, and in the broken, pierced, bleeding body of Jesus, that mercy nonetheless looks dreadful. But God takes all of that horror, all of that death, and exhausts it in his infinite life, his infinite love. God takes the cross and makes of it a sign of glory.

Also, the Good is no tame thing. The Good is wild and fierce, an all-consuming living flame of Love.

## So what happens in the Good Friday liturgy?

It begins and ends in silence. We read the Passion of Jesus again, we pray for the whole world and all of humanity according to a very ancient pattern of praying, offering our prayers in union with Christ's prayers for us on the cross. At one point, a cross is unveiled and processed to the front of the church as someone sings three times, "Behold the Wood of the Cross, whereon was hung the world's salvation. O come let us adore him." For the space of the liturgy, that cross ritually *is* the True Cross of Jesus, and it's treated with incredible devotion. People are invited to reverence the True Cross, during which a text called the Improperia or "The Solemn Reproaches" is often sung. The Reproaches are a lament, sung or said as if being sung or said by God to us (part of which is borrowed from the Prophet Micah). Here's an example of the text:

> Oh my people! What have I done to thee? Or wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me.
> I did give thee to drink the water of life from the rock: and thou hast given me to drink but gall and vinegar.
> I did smite the kings of the Canaanites for thy sake: and thou hast smitten my head with a reed.
> I did give thee a royal scepter: and thou hast given unto my head a crown of thorns.
> I did raise thee on high with great power: and thou hast hanged me upon the gibbet of the Cross.

After the veneration of the True Cross, the Eucharist is given from the reserved Sacrament consecrated the previous night.

## Why?

The Eucharistic prayer includes the whole drama of salvation, Jesus' life, the cross and the empty tomb. The Eucharist is itself a real participation in the Resurrected Body of Jesus: it is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. The Eucharist is given and received on Good Friday because we desperately need Jesus, but the prayer is not said (and the Eucharist is given from the reserved Sacrament) because we've not ritually reached Easter just yet…even as we acknowledge in receiving Eucharist that the reality of Easter is at work in the world, recreating all things.

## What happens next?

All of the Eucharist is consumed. The church is bereft of the Eucharistic presence of her Lord. At the end of the Good Friday service, if there is a door or gate to the chapel where the altar of repose is, that door or gate is often closed loudly and sealed to represent the burial of Jesus.

## Wow. That's a lot.

Right?

## What happens on Holy Saturday?

Holy Saturday commemorates the day of rest Jesus spent in the grave.

## Was Jesus really resting?

Well…yes and no. We remember on Holy Saturday that Jesus descended into hell to bring the Sabbath Rest to those in the pit, to liberate them, to make of death and the grave an entrance into everlasting life.

## Is this when the Great Vigil happens?

Yes! The Vigil happens late on Saturday. It's called a Vigil because it anticipates the feast of Easter on the following day, and because in the ancient way of reckoning days, the day began at sunset the day before!

So as the sun sets, we gather in the growing darkness…and we light a fire: because darkness does not have the last word, the grave does not have the last word, sin does not have the last word. The fire represents both the raw light and fire of God's life and love, but it also represents that first moment of creation when the Spirit hovered over the dark depths of chaos and said: Let there be light!

Some of the fire is used to light a special candle, called the Paschal candle, which represents the light of Christ in our midst (the candle is marked with a cross; with five nails and five pieces of incense, representing the five wounds of Christ and the fragrant offering of Christ's sacrifice; with the Greek letters Alpha and Omega, representing Christ as first and last; and with the current year, representing that Christ and his work are both eternal and within time). The candle is then brought into the church as the deacon sings three times, "The Light of Christ! Thanks be to God!"

## Just like the cross on Good Friday!

Yes!

The light from the Paschal Candle is used to light candles throughout the church, including hand candles the people hold. The dark church, the tomb, the sin-darkened world, is filling with God's light! The world is being remade! A song, called the Exsultet (which means: Rejoice!) is sung in praise of the Light of Christ, and then a series of readings are read and responses to them made. These readings trace the history of the world and God's working out of the world's redemption from the beginning of all things: the world is being remade as a thing redeemed!

When the readings are finished, often the Litany of the Saints is sung (recalling our communion with the saints), baptismal waters are blessed, baptisms are performed (bringing folks into the fellowship of the saints, of the church, of Christ's Body), sometimes folks are confirmed or received into the church if a Bishop is present, and then the people are sprinkled with the waters of rebirth, the lustral waters of the font: all of humanity is being remade and redeemed!

Α
2020
1
Ω

Then! Suddenly! There's a great noise, a commotion! Bells begin to ring, lights come on, statues and images are unveiled, and the proclamation is made: Christ has risen!! Where violence and death seemed to prevail, now the Life and Love of God have won the day! The one we nailed to the cross has returned to us not as vengeful, but as forgiveness! Jesus has taken our death into himself and gifted us with his own divine life!

The Eucharist is celebrated largely as usual, only with an excess of wonder, joy and exhilaration. Any extra Sacrament is placed once more in the Tabernacle at the end of Eucharist! And, in many places, a festive reception follows the Vigil.

It's Easter!!! The fast is over!!! New Life is here and available to EVERYONE!!! (That's definitely better than getting angels at the end of Lent!)

# VI. CONCLUSION

## Whew! What a journey Lent is!!

Right?!? From death and ashes to life and resurrection! The mysteries of the faith are amazing and deep!

## Is this all I need to know about Lent?

Oh, definitely not! Which is to say: this little booklet is nowhere near exhaustive!!

## So what more do I need to know, and where can I find the information?

My suggestion? Live into the liturgical life of the Church. That life will show you things no booklet ever could. And you'll know all the things you need to know not as information you've downloaded, but as love, which is the highest form of knowing!

## What if I'm not baptized and would like to be baptized at the Great Vigil?

Talk to a priest!

## Can we talk about Easter now?

Absolutely! But not here! This booklet is already long enough. In the meantime, I hope you have and keep a Holy Lent!