



**RETURN
TO THE LORD**

Praying and Living Lent

saint mary's press

TONY ALONSO

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PRAYING AND LIVING LENT

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INTRODUCTION

When you want to be a better athlete, musician, or student, what do you do? Practice, practice, practice. The same is true of being a better Christian. It is hard work! Although we can and should practice our Christian living all year, Lent is a time to more intensely focus our energy on how we can do, and be, better in the world. Think of Lent as spring training for Christian living!

To help us in our Lenten practice, the Church offers three things to guide us on our way: praying, fasting, and almsgiving (giving money or service to those in need). The extra time we spend praying during Lent leads us closer to God. We focus our prayer on the places in our lives and in our world that need improvement. Our fasting isn't about denying ourselves as a sort of punishment, and it isn't even just about food. We fast from food, television, video games, computers, and so on, so we can literally hunger for God. Our fasting also puts us in touch with those whose hunger is never filled because they live in poverty. Finally, our praying and fasting lead us to action. Almsgiving is sharing time, talent, and treasure with those in need.

COURSE **SETTING THE COURSE**

This book will help you set the course for your Lenten journey. The prayers, reflections, and other information provided are tools to help you enter more deeply into the richness of this season. This book is designed to be as flexible as possible so you can pray and reflect at your own pace and in a way that fits your schedule. Each year you can return to this book and use it differently

depending on how you want to focus your time. Each of the chapter sections is described in this introduction so you can think about how you might want to use the book this year.

USING Using This Book

PRAYER A Prayer to Start the Day

This prayer, based on imagery from the Lenten Scriptures and the week's focus (see the section titled "This Week's Focus"), is one you might say each day during the week when you first wake up, when you're sitting at the breakfast table, or just before your first class at school.

FOCUS This Week's Focus

This section offers a word, an image, or a phrase for your reflection during the week. All the other sections of the chapter tie back to the focus for the week in some way. Questions are included to spark your thoughts and to encourage reflection, and space is provided for you to journal and respond to the questions. You might return to this section each day and notice how your answers to the questions change throughout the course of the week.

INTRODUCING . . .

In this section, you will read about a person or a story that will help guide your reflection. Think of the various people you read about in this section as your companions on the Lenten journey.

CELEBRATIONS Lent Celebrations

The Lenten season includes various rituals, prayers, and other liturgies. This section offers background on these celebrations and connects them to daily life.

SCRIPTURES LENT SCRIPTURES

Especially striking during Lent is the rich imagery of the Scriptures. This section of each chapter offers you the opportunity to read and reflect on the Scripture readings for each of Lent's Sunday liturgies. Spending time with the Scriptures is probably the best way to deepen your understanding of Lent. Space is provided for you to journal after the listing of the Scripture readings.

You will notice that there are three sets of Scripture readings for each week: Year A, Year B, and Year C. This is because the readings for each Sunday are on a three-year cycle. The readings you hear Sunday at Mass won't be heard again for another three years. The new liturgical year begins with the First Sunday of Advent each year. You may be wondering how to figure out which year you're in right now. . . . One way would be to ask a priest or someone else who works at your church. You could also check online or check a missalette (a book with the readings, found in the pews of many churches).

Depending on how much time you have, read as many of the Scriptures as you'd like. Take your time with them; you have the entire week to spend on four passages (first reading, psalm, second reading, and Gospel). You might spend the first two days of the week reading and reflecting on the first reading, the second two days of the week on the psalm, and so on. Whatever you decide, just remember that this isn't homework! There's no quiz at the end of this book. Reflecting on the Scriptures is for you. It's a way to put you in touch with God and what God's Word might be saying to you in your life. Think of reading the Scriptures as prayer, not as work.

LIVING LIVING LENT

As our prayer and reflection leads us closer to God, God leads us to action. This section suggests some practical things you might do each week to live out the Gospel in your daily life. These suggestions are meant to spark your imagination. Use them as a guide, but be creative in ways you might live out the Gospel each week.

PRAYER A PRAYER TO CONCLUDE THE DAY

Like the prayer to start the day, this is a prayer based on the imagery of the week's focus as well as the Lenten Scriptures. This is a prayer to pray before going to sleep. It might be in addition to other prayers you say on your own or with your family.

APPENDIX

The appendix of this book offers two sets of the stations of the cross for your personal reflection and prayer. These are described in chapter 5.

SHARING THE JOURNEY

In addition to walking the Lenten journey with your parish family, you may also want to share some time each week reflecting with a friend or a family member. Consider discussing some of the Scriptures or discussing the reflection questions with someone who might be interested. Sharing the journey with someone close to you will help strengthen your relationship with each other and with God.

THE EUCHARIST: THE HEART OF THE LENTEN SEASON

However you decide to use this book, remember that the heart of the Lenten season, like the heart of our whole prayer lives, is the celebration of Sunday Eucharist. Each Sunday at Mass, we hear Scripture readings that encourage us to look closely at our lives and reflect on how we might change our ways of thinking and being. Most important, we join our community in giving thanks to God for our many blessings. In our sharing in the Eucharist, we are nourished to go back into the world and truly live the Gospel. The Eucharist is the food that strengthens us for our Lenten journey.

THE LENTEN JOURNEY

Lent literally means “to lengthen” because the days begin to lengthen as spring approaches. Lent’s forty days (counted from the First Sunday of Lent until Holy Thursday) are a journey to strengthen us in our baptismal covenant with God. So much of this journey, like your whole life’s journey, is about letting yourself be open to what God is trying to say to you through the rituals, images, and stories of the season. The wonderful thing is that your experience of Lent will change from year to year. Again and again you can come to this book to spark your thoughts and deepen your reflection on this sacred season. But the best part of this journey is the unique gift of your life experience you bring to it.

THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Lead Us Not into Temptation

PRAYER A PRAYER TO START THE DAY


Loving God,
You know the depths of my heart:
when I am at my best
and when I am at my worst.
Time and time again,
you open your arms in love to me,
calling me home to you.
As I begin this journey
of praying, fasting, and sharing,
let my life reflect to others
the great love you have shown me.
Let me be quicker to give than to receive,
quicker to love than to judge,
quicker to believe the best about
those around me than the worst.
Open my ears to your holy Word,
open my eyes to the face of Christ in each of my sisters and brothers,
and open my heart to your love,
poured out in your beloved Son, Jesus.
Amen.

FOCUS THIS WEEK'S FOCUS


What comes to mind when you think of the word *temptation*? Perhaps an image of a person dangling something tantalizing in front of you jumps into your mind. But temptation isn't always as obvious as we imagine it. Temptation surrounds us in all sorts of subtle ways. Every time we turn on the television or open a magazine, we see an ad that's trying to convince us a product will somehow make our lives better, easier, happier. Sometimes our peers tempt us to gossip or talk negatively about others. In school we may be tempted to take the easy way out by cheating or not putting our best effort into our studies. Frequently we give in to these temptations not even realizing the effects they are having on our lives.

During this first week of Lent, try to open your eyes to the more subtle ways you may be tempted to swerve off the path God has planned for you. Also take time to think about the people, activities, and things in your life that lead you closer to God.

Consider these questions as you journey through this first week of Lent:

 **What are some of the more subtle ways I am being tempted away from the path God has prepared for me?**

 **How can I challenge those who are on a negative path without judging them?**

 **Why is it so tempting to gossip about others and be drawn into conversations that can be hurtful to others? What can I do to change the direction of conversations that begin that way?**

ADAM AND EVE INTRODUCING: ADAM AND EVE

Adam and Eve are probably the most universally known people in the Old Testament. Perhaps this is because all of us have experienced situations that we can relate to the situation of Adam and Eve—maybe not the part about being the firstborn of God, but definitely the part about being led into temptation even when we've been told something is wrong for us!

When the serpent tempts Adam and Eve in the garden by offering them the power to know good and evil, the temptation is too great for them to resist and they break their covenant of trust with God. After hearing this story, we might find it easy to think that temptation always comes from something evil and conniving like a serpent. But temptation comes from all directions in a variety of ways. What we can learn most from the story of Adam and Eve is that we always have a choice to make: God's greatest gift to us is the freedom to choose!

Will we make choices that put distance between God and us, or will we make choices that bring us closer to God? Throughout life we sometimes succeed and sometimes fail to choose the right path. However, it is always important to remember that everything God creates is good, and that especially includes you! How can you honor your commitment to God through your everyday choices during this sacred season?

CELEBRATIONS LENT CELEBRATIONS: ASH WEDNESDAY

If you've ever been to an Ash Wednesday liturgy, you know it's one of the most crowded of the year! We gather on Ash Wednesday to begin the Lenten season by receiving the outward sign of ashes traced on our foreheads. Ashes are both an ancient symbol of repentance and a symbol to remind us of our humanity—that this life is not the end. The ashes we receive are connected to Jesus's Passion, death, and Resurrection in a special way: they are created by burning the palms used at the previous year's Palm Sunday Mass.

As the words "remember you are dust and to dust you will return" (*Sacramentary*, p. 77) are spoken when ashes are traced on your forehead, remember that Lent is not a journey of despair and sorrow, but a journey that ends with Easter, in Resurrection. The same is true of life—it is not a journey to death, but to new life in Christ. The ashes we receive are an outward sign of the inward commitment we make with God to spend this season reflecting, praying, and growing in our relationship with God. As you are signed with ashes, let it be a reminder of the need to always turn to God, who waits with open arms no matter how many times you have turned away from God's love!