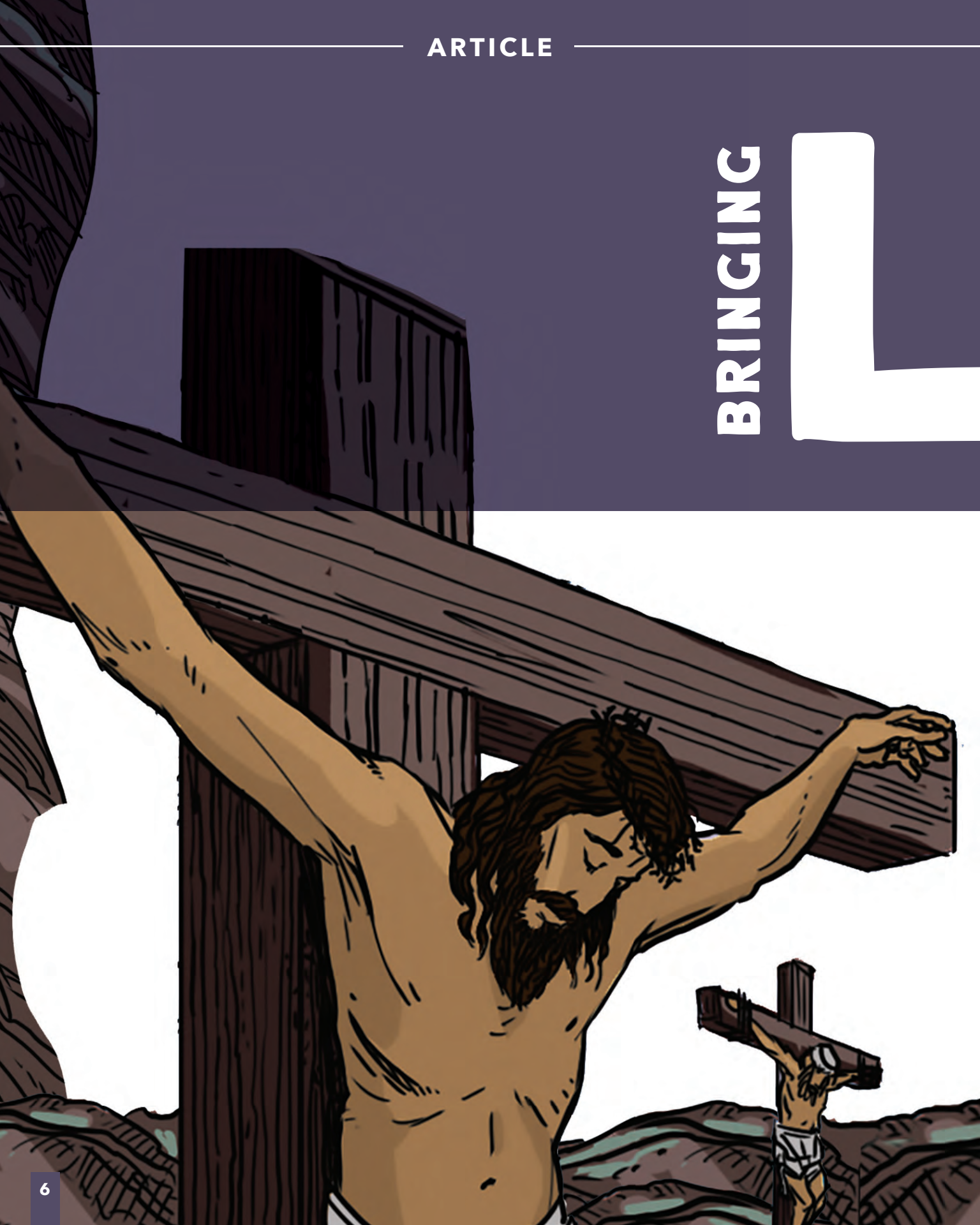


BRINGING



LENT TO LIFE

BY LAURIE ZILIAK

Lent can be challenging, especially for younger children.

It is a penitential season of the liturgical year. Penance, by definition, expresses repentance for wrongdoing and is neither fun nor light-hearted. But Lent is an important part of our Church year, and it provides an opportunity for significant personal and spiritual growth.

Lenten practices are essential in the journey towards Easter for all ages. Honoring Lent with the children with whom we minister is important. **Recognizing Lent in a way that is meaningful for children can have a lasting impact on their understanding and practice of this liturgical season.**

The following pages offer some effective practices for bringing Lent to life with children.

CHANGE PRAYER PRACTICES

Prayer practices establish expectations and set the tone for your group. Examine your current prayer practices and find small ways to change them to embrace Lent.

BY MODIFYING YOUR DAILY PRAYER PRACTICES, YOU SIGNAL THAT SOMETHING DIFFERENT IS AFOOT.

By modifying your daily prayer practices, you signal that something different is afoot. **Changes can be simple but effective.**

Begin prayer each day with a simple phrase, such as, "During this Lenten season, we pray..." or, "During Lent, we are called to turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel, and so we pray..." You might also incorporate or lengthen the silence during prayer (even if only for 30 seconds). Adding music can significantly change the spirit of prayer.

Using a short, sung refrain (possibly one used in the local parish during Lent) or playing a video of reflective music brings a different dimension to prayer. **A simple modification to routine can help the children recognize and enter more deeply into the Lenten season.**



INCORPORATE A SCRIPTURAL THEME

Liturgical Lenten celebrations are profoundly scriptural (as is all of Catholic liturgy). One of the phrases used at the distribution of ashes on Ash Wednesday reflects the first words of Jesus in Mark's Gospel. The same Gospel readings often appear each year during Lent as RCIA candidates prepare to enter the Church, such as the Woman at the Well (John 4:4-42) or the raising of Lazarus (found in John, chapter 11). Additionally, a number of common psalms are recommended for use during Lent, including Psalm 50, Psalm 90 and Psalm 129. Each of these focuses on the mercy of God.

NAME YOUR THEME AND INCORPORATE IT INTO PRAYER AND ACTIVITIES.

Identify a phrase from a psalm and refer to it daily during the season of Lent. Or choose a passage

from one of the Lenten Gospels (all can be found on the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' website at www.usccb.org) to serve as your theme. If time allows, invite the group to offer input into naming a scriptural theme for Lent. Name your theme and incorporate it into prayer and activities. For more ideas for both scriptural theme and prayer, see the article "Scriptural Prayer with Children," on page 22 of this issue. **Connecting Lent to a scriptural theme can help children enter into the tradition of the Church.**





COLOR IT PURPLE

The liturgical color of Lent is purple. **Create a strong visual reminder of Lent by bringing purple into your lessons in every possible way.** Copy handouts on purple paper. Incorporate purple background for bulletin boards, white boards, and projection slides. Leave comments on student work using pens with purple ink.

If rules allow, invite the children to wear a purple shirt on a specified day (perhaps to a Lenten Mass). Invite the rest of the school or religious education program to also wear purple. A simple visual reminder can continually underscore the presence of the Lenten season.

CREATE A LENTEN PRAYER SPACE

Create or modify a Lenten prayer space in the room. **Cover a table with purple cloth and place symbolic items on the table.** Include items such as a candle, a bowl of ashes, a cross or crucifix, a Bible, a basket for food collection, and a monetary collection component such as a rice bowl. Include Lenten prayer cards for children to write down their Lenten practices (see the Weekly Lenten Challenge ideas below). Open the Bible to the Gospel for the coming Sunday and mark the beginning and end of the reading. Invite the children to use the prayer space at certain times throughout the day.



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FACILITATE A WEEKLY LENTEN CHALLENGE

The six-plus weeks of Lent can be a long time to engage in a spiritual discipline, for children and adults alike. For children, giving up something for that long can seem impossible. And, once the Lenten discipline is broken, children often feel like they have failed and give up the exercise entirely.

Offer a fresh start and variety with a weekly Lenten challenge.

Invite all the children to write down a Lenten practice that would be appropriate for the entire group. Make sure that the practices are varied each week. Collect the papers and put them in a basket. Draw four papers, write the Lenten practices in the front of the room, and challenge each child to commit to one of the listed practices for the week. Remind the children of their chosen Lenten challenge throughout the week if possible, or send a note home to families explaining the challenge activity. Conclude the challenge week by asking the children to reflect on how they did, what they learned, and what they want to do differently the following week. Continue this practice for each week, emphasizing the importance and role of Lenten practices.

Lent can be a time of spiritual growth and awareness if we are intentional in our Lenten journey. Take the time to bring Lent to life for both yourself and the children. As you do, keep an eye toward Easter. Implement Lenten practices that can also be modified for Easter, thus bringing your group through the complete journey to new life in Christ. ■

