

# The Journey

If you were setting out on a journey, you would need many things: food, water, maps, clothing, and maybe tools to help you in case there's trouble. You can look at Lent as a journey, too. In the Lenten Journey, you travel with Jesus toward Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

The journey begins with Ash Wednesday. This is the day when Catholics and some other Christians have ashes placed on their foreheads.

The ashes are made by burning blessed palms left over from last year's Palm Sunday. This reminds us that nothing on this earth lasts: plants, buildings, animals, roads, even people eventually wither, crumble or die. The only everlasting thing in our world is Jesus and his message of everlasting life through him.

Using ashes this way isn't new. Long before Jesus walked the earth, people sprinkled ashes on their heads or all over themselves when they were sorry for something they did and wanted to make up for it.

When a priest or deacon puts ashes on your forehead on Ash Wednesday he says, “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel.”



We might feel unhappy when we hear this because the words remind us that we are all sinners. We don't enjoy being reminded that we do the wrong thing at times. Hearing these words can be comforting, though, for they remind us that we are human. We aren't gods, angels or superheroes. In short, we aren't perfect, and Jesus doesn't expect us to be. He does, however, ask that we try to do what's right. Even if we make a mistake and fail though, Jesus loves us and wants us to try doing better. With God's help, we can continue trying, too.

## Jesus Loves You



## What is Fasting?



Lent is a time for fasting, which means eating less than you usually do.

Now “eating less” can mean something different to every person you ask. The Church explains its ideas about fasting in a book called the *Code of Canon Law*. In this case, a *canon* is not a big gun that you shoot cannonballs out of. A *canon* is the law the Church makes. In the United States, the Church's law says that people between the ages of 18 and 59 must fast on *Ash Wednesday* and *Good Friday*. Other countries' rules for fasting can be a bit different. Even if you are too young to *have* to fast, it's good to know about fasting now so you can understand it when you're old enough to fast

When people fast they are supposed to eat only one full meal a day and not eat between meals. They can eat a little at the other two meals.

## Why Do People Fast?

Fasting is not just a Christian thing. Many Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and people from other religions fast. Fasting must be quite special if all those different people fast. People fast because it's a good way of practicing self-control. For example, if you can keep from eating between meals, you're more likely to be able to resist more serious temptations - like cheating on a test or copying someone's homework or sneaking away from home to do something you shouldn't.

Even if you're too young to *have* to fast during Lent, try it for a day. It takes a lot of love to do things like fasting when you don't have to. No one is too young to love Jesus. Fasting is a way of showing Jesus how much you love him.



Another reason people fast is to remind them of millions of people in the world who don't have enough to eat or don't have enough of the proper healthy foods they need. For starving people, fasting isn't a choice; it's a fact of life.



## What About Abstinence?

Abstinence is a big, fancy word that means "to do without something." You've probably practiced some sort of abstinence in your life already. When you're sick with an upset stomach, you don't eat things like tacos or pizza because those things could make your stomach feel worse. So you abstain from eating spicy foods.

In the U.S. Church, people over the age of 14 are asked to abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and all Fridays in Lent. Even if you are under 14, your parents may not want you to have meat on those days. They may do this because they want to teach you early to do small acts of sacrifice. If you don't like to eat fish, cheese, eggs and other non-meat dishes, you might feel crabby because you'd really rather eat a cheeseburger or a pepperoni pizza.

The Church doesn't ask you to abstain from cheeseburgers because meat is bad for you or because the Pope and Bishops like to see you crabby. The real reason Catholics fast and abstain is to grow stronger in their love of God. Fast and abstinence, like prayer and works of charity, bring us closer to Christ and remind us that we are God's special people in the world today. Fast and abstinence tell us to put God ahead of food and drink.



## One Gate Leads to Christ



If you would ask most people, they'd say they want their life's journey to end in heaven. But in order to do this we must take the "narrow gate" by making the correct choices that lead in that direction.

In our lives, amusement parks, new CD's, chocolates, and the latest video game can look like sheer heaven to us. Fasting, prayer and doing the proper thing can be hard or boring. Yet, we have to remember the words of Jesus when someone asked him if only a few people would be "saved" (that means "going to heaven"). Jesus answered, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough". (Luke 13:24)

Jesus meant that the way to heaven is like squeezing through a skinny gate - it's hard to do. Most people want to choose the easy, wide-open gate to get through life.

During Lent, we make a special effort to find the courage to walk through the narrow gate. Following Jesus is not easy. That's what he meant when he talked about entering through the narrow gate. It's not as easy as plugging in a CD player or eating a candy bar. All the little sacrifices we make during Lent are ways of entering through the narrow gate instead of always taking the easy way.

Sacrifices are important all year long, not just during Lent, but if we make an extra effort to sacrifice during Lent, we can get into the habit of doing good things all year long.

When we sacrifice, we follow Jesus. No one likes to do things that are difficult. Jesus doesn't tell us that we have to like sacrifices, but his own example of the suffering and crucifixion shows us that suffering is part of the Christian journey through life. He wanted to show us that through sacrifice, good can triumph over evil. He wanted us to see that the easy way through life is not always the best way. Good things happen with God's help and our hard work.

