



LENT REFLECTIONS

Fr. Robert Barron



WORD ON FIRE CATHOLIC MINISTRIES

www.WORDONFIRE.org



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this great Lenten journey! I'm so glad you're joining me and many others during this holy season.

In its simplest terms, Lent is the season when we refocus ourselves on the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many saints have described it as an apprenticeship to Jesus in the desert. We go with the Lord into the wilderness, and we watch him at close quarters, imitating him, seeing what he saw, and enduring what he endured.

Holy people in the biblical tradition—Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, even Jesus himself—spent time in the harshness of the desert before they embarked upon their missions, because the desert is a place of clarification. Stripped down, undistracted, simplified, they are able to align themselves to God.

That's what we'll be doing for next forty-seven days, beginning tomorrow and lasting through Easter Sunday. Each day we'll focus on a particular theme:

Monday – Prayer
Tuesday – Fasting
Wednesday – Almsgiving
Thursday – Repentance
Friday – The Cross
Saturday – Saints
Sunday – Resurrection

As we begin this Lenten season tomorrow, let's enter the desert the way a marathoner enters into his training, or a professor into her research, or a businessperson into a challenging project: with a joyful and excited resolve. In the desert we'll meet a God who is love, through and through. Let us spend these holy days responding to the delights and demands of that love.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Robert Barron". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fr. Robert Barron



LENT REFLECTIONS



Ash Wednesday

DAY 1: JUDGED ACCORDING TO LOVE

The Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross said that in the evening of life we shall be judged according to our love. In Matthew 25, the nature of love is specified. It is not primarily a feeling, an attitude, or a conviction but rather a concrete act on behalf of those in need—the hungry, the homeless, the lonely, the imprisoned, the forgotten. It is the bearing of another's burden.

Over the next forty-seven days, resolve to perform a particular and sustained act of love.

Make several visits to your relative in the nursing home. Converse regularly with a lonely person on your block. Tutor and befriend a kid who might be in danger of losing his way. Repair a broken friendship. Bring together bickering factions at your place of work. Make a number of financial contributions to a worthy organization that needs help.

Numerous spiritual masters have witnessed to something odd: belief in God is confirmed and strengthened not so much from intellectual effort as from moral action.

When a man asked the English Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins what he must do in order to believe, Hopkins replied, “Give alms.”

As you love through tangible acts, you will come to believe more deeply and to enter more fully into friendship with God.

“Belief in God is confirmed and strengthened not so much from intellectual effort as from moral action.”



First Thursday of Lent

DAY 2: NO WAY UP BUT DOWN

Something I have noticed over the years is that the holiest people in our tradition are those who are most aware of their sinfulness. Whether it is Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux, or Mother Teresa, the saints are those who are convinced of their inadequacy.

When Isaiah encounters the Lord he says, “I am a man of unclean lips!” When Peter is in the presence of the Messiah he says, “Lord, leave me, for I am a sinful man.” G.K. Chesterton once said, “A saints only means a man who really knows that he is a sinner.”

The holy person has no illusions about him or herself. It is an extraordinary and surprising phenomenon that the saints seem to be those who are most conscious of their sinfulness.

At times we are tempted to think that this is a form of attention-getting, a sort of false humility. But then we realize that it is proximity to the light that reveals the smudges and imperfections that otherwise go undetected. A windshield that appears perfectly clean and transparent in the early morning can become opaque when the sun shines directly on

it. Standing close to the luminosity of God, the holy person is more intensely exposed, all beauty and ugliness more thoroughly unveiled.

There's no way up but down; no real holiness without awareness. At least part of being a saint is knowing you're a sinner.

"The holy person has no illusions about himself."



First Friday of Lent

DAY 3: POLISHING THE DIAMONDS

There is a regrettable interpretation of the cross that has, unfortunately, infected the minds of many Christians. This is the view that the bloody sacrifice of the Son on the cross was “satisfying” to the Father, and was given for the appeasement of a God infinitely angry at sinful humanity. In this reading, the crucified Jesus is like a child hurled into the fiery mouth of a pagan divinity in order to assuage its wrath.

But what ultimately refutes this twisted theology is the well-known passage from John’s Gospel: “God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son, that all who believe in him might have eternal life.” John reveals that it is not out of anger or vengeance or in a desire for retribution that the Father sends the Son, but precisely out of love. God the Father is not some pathetic divinity whose bruised personal honor needs to be restored; rather God is a parent who burns with compassion for his children who have wandered into danger.

Does the Father hate sinners? No, but he hates sin. Does God harbor indignation at the unjust? No, but God despises injustice. Thus God sends his Son, not gleefully to see him suffer, but compassionately to set things right.

St. Anselm, the great medieval theologian who is often unfairly blamed for the cruel theology of satisfaction, was eminently clear on this score. We sinners are like diamonds that have fallen into the muck. Made in the image of God, we have soiled ourselves through violence and hatred. God, claimed Anselm, could have simply pronounced a word of forgiveness from heaven, but this would not have solved the problem. It would not have restored the diamonds to their original brilliance. Instead, in his passion to reestablish the beauty of creation, God came down into the muck of sin and death, brought the diamonds up, and then restored their brilliance.

In so doing, of course, God had to get dirty. This sinking into the dirt—this divine solidarity with the lost—is the “sacrifice” that the Son makes to the infinite pleasure of the Father. It is the sacrifice expressive, not of anger or vengeance, but of compassion.

Jesus said that any disciple of his must be willing to take up his cross and follow the master. If God is self-forgetting love even to the point of death, then we must be such love. If God is willing to break open his own heart, then we must be willing to break open our hearts for others. The cross, in short, must become the very structure of the Christian life.

“God sends his Son, not gleefully to see him suffer, but compassionately to set things right.”



First Saturday of Lent

DAY 4: MOTHER TERESA'S SECRET TO JOY

When she was still a Loreto nun in Calcutta, India, Mother Teresa made her way by train to Darjeeling for a retreat. And on that train she heard a voice inviting her to carry the light of Christ to the darkest places. When she returned to Calcutta, she began the process that led to the founding of the Missionaries of Charity, an order whose purpose would be to respond to that summons. That work is carried on today by her sisters in more than 500 establishments around the globe.

A couple of years ago, I personally experienced this extraordinary work. While producing the ten-part CATHOLICISM series, our team filmed in a small hospital in Calcutta where the Missionaries of Charity care for children with mental and physical disabilities. When we arrived, the electricity had just gone out, and the room was stiflingly hot. Everywhere, the sisters and a large team of volunteers milled about, providing medical assistance, speaking to the kids, teaching some of them to sing simple songs, or just holding them.

There was one sister who was carrying in her arms a small

girl, perhaps two years old. The child was blind. I asked sister how they had come to care for this girl, and she told me that she had simply been abandoned on the street. “She is my special baby,” the sister said. And then she flashed this absolutely radiant smile, which told me that she had found a deep joy precisely in this hot, crowded hospital, in the midst of one of the most squalid cities in the world.

All of us human beings want joy. Everything we do and say, all of our actions and endeavors, are meant to produce contentment, peace, happiness. Even the most morally corrupt person ultimately wants joy. But how do we find it? The most elemental mistake—made consistently across the centuries to the present day—is to seek joy by filling up in ourselves something that we perceive to be missing. We tell ourselves that we’d be happy if we just had enough pleasure, enough power, enough security, enough esteem. But this does not work.

It is the supreme paradox of the Christian spiritual tradition that we become filled with joy precisely in the measure that we contrive a way to make of ourselves a gift. By emptying out the self in love for the other, we become filled to the brim with the divine life. The smile of that Missionary of Charity, which was the same smile Mother Teresa bore, signaled the presence of a joy that no wealth, no security, no pleasure, no honor could possibly provide, and that can emerge even in the most miserable context.

The secret to joy is self-giving love. Mother Teresa imparted that to her sisters, and she offers the same lesson to us.

“The secret to joy is self-giving love.”



First Sunday of Lent

DAY 5: TRULY RISEN FROM THE DEAD

When we recite the Creed, we don't say a word about Jesus' teaching, but we do profess that Jesus was "crucified under Pontius Pilate." He did not simply die; he was put to death, precisely as a political criminal. He was killed on a Roman instrument of torture—overwhelmed, it seemed, by the hatred, violence, and dysfunction of the sinful world.

In that case, why don't we see Jesus simply as another in a long line of tragic heroes, raging in vain against the powers of the world? Because, as the Creed puts it, he "rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."

Throughout much of the period after the Second Vatican Council, too many theologians, teachers, and preachers have tended to downplay the reality of the Resurrection, turning it into a vague symbol or an expression of the faith of the disciples. But if this is all the Resurrection means, then forget it!

Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has commented incisively that if Jesus had not been raised bodily from the dead, Christianity would never have survived as a messianic movement. Wright says that the

clearest indication, to a first-century Jew, that someone was not the Messiah would be his death at the hands of the enemies of Israel. That the church of Christ endured as a messianic religion is possible only on the assumption that the crucified one was, nevertheless, objectively alive. Claims that the disciples were inspired by a dead man would never have stood up against the early critics of Christianity.

Truly risen from the dead, victorious over sin and violence, Jesus is now the Lord—the one to whom we owe total allegiance, the one who should become the dominant force in every aspect of our lives.

*“Truly risen from the dead, victorious over sin and violence,
Jesus is now the Lord.”*



First Monday of Lent

**DAY 6: FIVE SIMPLE WAYS
TO DEEPEN YOUR PRAYER**

Lent is a time to deepen our prayer lives, and thankfully there are a number of things the Church recommends. Here are just five simple strategies. Choose one, preferably one you're not familiar with, and commit to it this Lent:

1. *Pray before the Blessed Sacrament*

Spend some time if you can, every day or maybe once a week, praying in front of Our Lord. Don't just talk—be still and listen.

2. *The Jesus Prayer*

Pray this simple prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Repeat it over and over again throughout the day, for one minute, five minutes, or half an hour. Pray it at the beginning and end of the day. Let its calming rhythm focus your mind on God.

3. *The “Come, Holy Spirit” Prayer*

Simply praying, “Come, Holy Spirit” works anytime, anywhere—it's always a good prayer. For more, try praying the entire *Veni, Sancte, Spiritus*.

4. *The Rosary*

If you haven't prayed the rosary in a long time, pick it up during Lent. If you're unsure how, or if you've forgotten which mysteries to pray, there are plenty of free guides online or at your parish.

5. *The Mass*

If you don't go to Sunday Mass, go—you're obligated if you're a Catholic. If you do go to Sunday Mass, go daily during Lent. Decide to attend one extra Mass each week. Visit [MassTimes](#).org to find daily schedules at nearby parishes.

All of these are simple, straightforward ways to deepen your prayer life during Lent. You don't have to do them all, but just choose one and commit yourself.

*"If you haven't prayed the Rosary in a long time,
pick it up during Lent."*



First Tuesday of Lent

**DAY 7: HOW TO MAKE ROOM
FOR LIFE'S BIGGEST QUESTIONS**

The 17th-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal said that most of us spend our lives seeking diversions in a desperate attempt to avoid the hard and simple questions: who am I? What is the purpose of my life? What does God want of me?

We eat and drink, gamble and gossip, seek out the most banal entertainments, surrender to television and social media, attend party after party—all in order to avoid those questions.

Right now, identify the diversion that most distracts you from these questions. Then take some practical steps to rid yourself of it, or at least reduce it.

Are you preoccupied with eating and drinking? Then fast regularly. Do you watch too much television or spend too much time on Facebook? Then give yourself a specific limit. Do you indulge in idle chatter? Then resolve not to say anything mean about anybody (you'll find that your conversations are a lot shorter.) Do you socialize too much? Then refrain from non-essential parties for the rest of Lent. Clear the ground. Clean out the system. Make room for

yourself to ask and reflect on life's most important questions.

To follow Jesus into the desert is to divest yourself of diversions. It is to sacrifice the superficial so that the depth may rise. It is to still the chatter so that God's voice might be heard.

“To follow Jesus into the desert is to divest yourself of diversions.”