

Giving up meat on the Fridays of Lent is probably harder to remember than it is to do. It applies to everyone age 14 and older. Exceptions are made for reasons of health, and pastors can grant a dispensation for people who want it. Still, many Catholics do more than this during Lent. They abstain from foods they shouldn't eat anyway, they pray more attentively, they donate, or they give more time to their family.

We observe special practices during Lent for many reasons. Our sacrifice on Fridays reminds us of the sacrifice of Jesus on Good Friday. Abstaining from meat helps us relate to the poor who don't have as many food choices as we do. Fasting breaks our habits of consumerism: As a society we shop for too many things we don't really need; we argue we've earned our money: we have a right to spend it; but we spend it on ourselves more than we do on the needy. By eating or shopping less during Lent, we save money that can be shared with the poor. Fasting teaches we can get along with less, and we can give away more. Our sacrifices remind other people about the holiness of this season, and they make it easier to pray. When you are well fed, you don't think about God very much; but when you're hungry, you talk to God all the time.

For 40 days we are on pilgrimage. We acknowledge our sins, we walk more carefully in the footsteps of Christ, and we look forward to our goal: Easter, when Jesus rises from the dead and we awake with a new heart. Lent is our pilgrimage; Lent is our exodus.

In today's gospel, Luke uses the word "exodus" to describe the journey Jesus takes to Jerusalem. The transfiguration occurs just before he sets out. In the original Exodus, Moses led the chosen people out of slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea; they crossed the desert behind a pillar of fire, ate manna from heaven, drank water from the rock, and entered the promised land. In Jesus' exodus, he walks to Jerusalem, where he will die on the cross, be placed in the tomb, and then rise into the promised land of heaven. During Lent we go through our exodus, confronting our sins, doing penance, and walking toward Easter. At the Easter Vigil, we will light the Paschal candle, our pillar of fire, we will hear the story of the original Exodus as well as the gospel of the resurrection, as Israel crossed the Red Sea several people here will cross the waters of baptism, and we will eat and drink not manna from heaven and water from the rock, but the body and blood of Christ, the first Easter eucharist, a foreshadowing of the banquet that awaits us in the promised land of heaven.

But to get there, we observe Lent. We avoid meat on Fridays. We may eat less, talk less, spend less, gossip less, watch TV less, use the internet less, smoke less, gamble less – because when we are less distracted by the things of this world, our hearts and minds open up to the things of the next world. When we sacrifice, we get hungry, and God has a chance to be the most precious food and drink for which we long.