



Finding God®

Our Response to God's Gifts

Signs and Symbols of the Lenten Journey

On Ash Wednesday, we embark on a journey. For forty days, we walk with family, friends, our fellow parishioners, Catholics around the world—and of course, with Jesus himself, who leads us.



This journey takes us on the same path walked by Christians of the past, as we fast, pray, and give alms as they did. In Lent, as in every liturgical season, signs and symbols help us draw closer to Christ and prepare us for Easter. Signs and symbols can be daily reminders of the right way ahead—especially for children, who live in a world of concretes, not abstractions—when side roads might tempt us to take another, easier way. ■

Special seasonal issue by [Amy Welborn](#)

The Desert

Filled with the holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil.

—Luke 4:1–2

Every year, the Gospel reading for the First Sunday of Lent is one of the accounts of Jesus' forty days in the desert. This year we hear from the Gospel of Luke. So, it is not an exaggeration to say that yes, Lent begins in a desert, no matter where we reside.

What kind of desert is this? It is not a literal expanse of sand dunes. No, the desert we speak of is just a space in our lives that is quiet and simple, free from distractions. To create that space in our homes and lives is a gift for young and old alike.

How can you create a desert space? Try these ideas:

- Minimize media use, as individuals and as a family.
- Plan prayer time together.
- Spend time outdoors together as a family.
- Make a space in the house with a cross or other religious art and some reading materials for every age.
- Build a small desert that includes religious articles, rocks, sand, and even cacti! ■

Ashes

"Repent, and believe in the Gospel."

"Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

We hear one of these phrases as we receive ashes on Ash Wednesday. Both reflect the ancient, traditional meaning that ashes held for God's people. When the people of Israel repented of sins and returned to the Lord, they would pour ashes on their heads or even sit among ashes.

On Ash Wednesday, we will see others bearing those ashes on their forehead. This is a sign, too: we are admitting to the world our weakness and our need for repentance. We are admitting that yes, we need God's mercy, and we're on a journey together to the place where that mercy pours out forever. And those ashes are an invitation, too, asking others to join us on our Lenten journey. ■



Symbols That Help Us Pray

During the season of Lent, we commit more time to prayer. We pray by ourselves and as a family. Even within the context of Lenten simplicity—that desert—signs and symbols can help us as we pray.

Colors

The color of Lent is violet, or purple. In the ancient world, purple dye was expensive to produce, so purple clothing was reserved for those who could afford it, usually royalty. The color purple, then, reminds us that Jesus is King of the Universe, conquering the enemy of sin and death through his love. Violet is also a sign of mourning, as we remember how sorry we are for our sins.

On the fourth Sunday of Lent, *Laetare* Sunday, violet is replaced with rose, or pink. *Laetare* is Latin for “rejoice,” the first word of the first prayer the priest will say on this Sunday. *Laetare* Sunday gives us a hint of the joy of Easter that is to come.

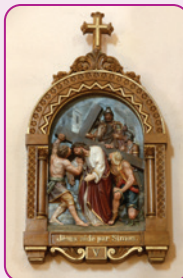
Cross and Crucifix

The cross and the crucifix are basic symbols of our life as disciples of Jesus throughout the year, but they take on a special role during Lent. Keeping a cross in sight in our homes gives us strength to keep walking with Jesus in our Lenten desert.

A crucifix has a corpus—or a depiction of Jesus’ body on it. The letters INRI above Jesus’ head on a crucifix are the acronym for the Latin of “Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews.” Sometimes you will see a skull at the base of a crucifix, which reminds us that Jesus’ love conquered death—and that the place of crucifixion outside Jerusalem was called “The Place of the Skull.” Some crosses may depict the risen Christ on it, which reminds us that Jesus’ sacrifice leads to joy and hope.

What kind of cross do you have in your home? How might you give it a special place during Lent? ■

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The Stations of the Cross

Many parishes have public celebrations of the Stations of the Cross on Fridays, the day of the week that Jesus died. On Good Friday, some parishes might host living Stations of the Cross, where members of the community portray each station. Of course, you can pray the Stations of the Cross anytime and anywhere, at church, at home, or outdoors. Encourage your children to set up the Stations of the Cross, drawing pictures to mark the way. Wherever you pray the Stations of the Cross, you’ll be walking with Jesus in love and joining your suffering to his in prayer for the whole world. ■

Stations of the Cross

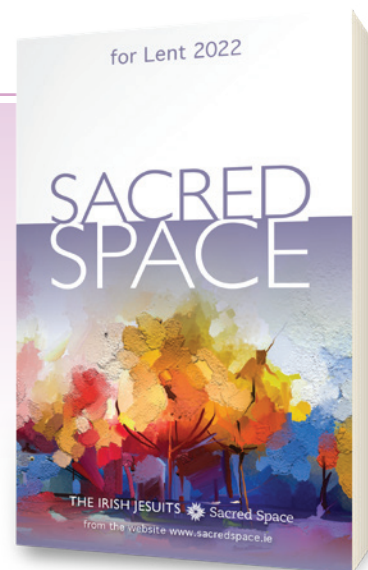


Scan the QR code to pray the [Stations of the Cross](#) as a family.

Sacred Space for Lent

Sacred Space for Lent invites readers to develop a closer relationship with God during this season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Throughout the Lenten season, each day includes a Scripture reading and points of reflection, as well as a weekly topic enhanced by six steps of prayer and meditation. ■

[Sacred Space for Lent 2022](#) by The Irish Jesuits (Loyola Press, 2022).



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Embrace the Season



Scan the QR code to learn how you can [embrace the season of Lent](#).

Symbols That Help Us Fast and Serve Others

Fasting and sacrificing is hard, especially as Lent progresses and we grow weary. The signs we see along the way can help nourish us spiritually as we follow Jesus in the desert.

The Bread of Life

We associate Lent with giving something up. In addition to our personal or family sacrifices, we abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent, and fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. We instead focus our desire on the food that truly nourishes us: the Eucharist.



Lenten Sacrifices

Fasting and abstaining are forms of prayer; the things we give up for Lent are symbolic actions that join us to Jesus' sacrifice. But our sacrifices have a purpose: to help us express solidarity with those who do not have the things they need to live a life of dignity. So, as we sacrifice, we also give, and the sign of a basket or a Catholic Relief Services Rice Bowl is a powerful sign of solidarity with those who are poor and hungry.

The Feasts of Lent

Three important feasts fall during Lent this year. On these days, we celebrate people and events who help us understand how we, too, can live Jesus' sacrifice.

Saint Patrick (March 17)

We recognize Saint Patrick by the symbols of the snakes and the shamrock. Both refer to legends about what he brought to Ireland: power over evil and the truth about God. Patrick sacrificed safety and comfort and brought the mercy of Jesus to the people of Ireland.



Saint Joseph (March 19)

Saint Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, is represented by his carpenter's tools and sometimes a staff flowering with lilies, which symbolizes God's choosing him and his purity. One of the ways communities celebrate Saint Joseph is through a Saint Joseph's Table overflowing with food that is shared with the community and the poor.



The Annunciation of the Lord (March 25)

We celebrate Mary's *fiat*, her willingness to say, "May it be done to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38). As we reflect on the images of young Mary receiving the angel, it helps us focus on what all the sacrifices and prayers of Lent are about: saying yes to the Lord and letting God's will be done in us. ■



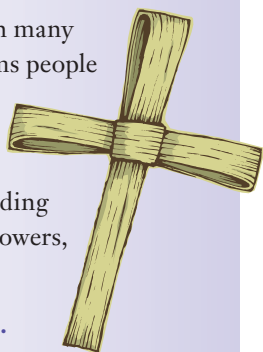


The Signs and Symbols of Holy Week

Holy Week will be hard and sad, but we know that life awaits us at the end: the joy of the risen Lord! We are not alone on this journey, either. With our families, we're joined to Christians all over the world as we reflect on some of the signs and symbols that speak to Jesus' Paschal Mystery:

- **Palm fronds.** When Jesus entered Jerusalem, people hailed him as the Messiah and laid palms at his feet. Palms were a sign of victory, so those who greeted him were expressing their belief that Jesus would bring them victory over those who oppressed them. The palms we receive on Palm Sunday help us reflect on our Savior, Jesus Christ.

- **Woven palms.** In many cultures, the palms people celebrate with on Palm Sunday are woven into shapes, including crosses, hearts, flowers, and more.



- **Covered statues.** You might have noticed that the statues in your church were covered with purple cloth on the Sunday before Palm Sunday. This sign alerts us that Holy Week approaches. We can veil any statues in our homes, as well. ■

Signs and Symbols of Easter

The Good News of Jesus' Resurrection surrounds us! From ancient times, Christians have seen signs of the eternal life Jesus brings in the world around them. As we celebrate the Easter joy with our families, we can search for these signs in our church buildings and in art, and incorporate them into our own home décor for the celebration!

- **The Paschal Candle.** The paschal candle, which is solemnly lit at the Easter Vigil, bears the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha and omega, which signify that Jesus is the beginning and the end of all things. Five "nails" of wax represent the five wounds of Jesus: in his hands, feet, and side. This candle will burn in church throughout the Easter season, and it is also lit at Baptisms, Confirmations, and funerals.



- **Fire.** On the night of the Easter Vigil, a fire is lit and burns brightly. It's a sign that Jesus, the Light of the World, breaks through the darkness of sin and death on this night. The paschal candle is lit from this fire at the start of the Vigil.
- **Water.** The waters of Baptism are solemnly blessed at the Easter Vigil, and the paschal candle is dipped into them. Through these waters, the Holy Spirit brings us into the new life of Christ as we are baptized.
- **Colors.** On Palm Sunday and Good Friday, the color red signifies Jesus' sacrifice; on Holy Thursday and Easter, white and gold remind us of Jesus' glory!
- **Egg.** Just like new life emerging from a rock-like hard shell, Jesus emerges from the tomb, victor over death! Sometimes the eggs are painted red to symbolize the blood of Christ.

- **Lily.** The lily represents purity and innocence restored to us by Christ from an apparently lifeless bulb.
- **Pomegranate.** The tiny seeds that spill from a blood-red fruit remind us of the life spilling from Jesus' sacrifice.
- **Lamb.** The Israelites sacrificed a lamb on the evening before their flight from Egypt. Jesus is the Lamb of God who sacrificed himself to save us from sin and death.



- **Pelican.** The pelican, which draws blood from its own breast to feed its young, is featured in Christian artwork as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice for us. ■

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