

Are You Engaging in the Season of Lent?

BY RITA FERRONE



How blessed we are to have seasons! The seasons of the natural cycle—spring, summer, fall, and winter—contribute different gifts to our lives. The natural year unfolds according to a certain order, established in creation and expressive of the providence of God. We honor the wisdom of creation as we delight in the changing seasons and respond to their uniqueness—by our food and drink, the clothes we wear, and the activities we pursue, each proper to its time. We respond to the character of each season by how we live and what we do.

In much the same way, the seasons of the liturgical year give shape and texture to the unfolding of time in our life as Catholics. These seasons celebrate our salvation, evoking the mystery of Jesus Christ alive in our midst throughout the year—each in a unique and beautiful way. Just as the taste of watermelon evokes summer, or the crisp white of a fresh snowfall evokes winter, so the scent of lilies evokes Easter and the purple of Lent conveys the sober dignity of penance and preparation for Baptism.

Each season of the liturgical cycle calls forth something unique from us, too. We engage in a season by observing its spirit and practicing the virtues and habits associated with it.

Once we make a personal commitment to keep the liturgical calendar, we become more aware of the abundant blessings God showers upon us in every season of the church year. We find that these seasons connect us to many others around the world and throughout Christian history, as well as to our near neighbors in our parish family. Lent offers a wonderful example of how a liturgical season can create a sacred space in our lives, in which time and faith meet and mutually enrich one another. These are forty precious days.

THE PURPOSE OF LENT

What does Lent set out to do? It's really simple. Our liturgical documents tell us that Lent has a two-fold purpose: the journey to Baptism (or to the renewal of Baptism) at the Easter Vigil or on Easter Sunday, and the purifying work of penance that takes place throughout the forty days. The traditional disciplines of *prayer*, *fasting*, and *almsgiving* support these two goals.

A helpful image for the Lenten season is the desert. On the First Sunday of Lent, we encounter Jesus sent by the Spirit into the desert to fast and pray before undertaking his ministry. He spent forty days in the desert, and wrestled



with temptations during that time. During the forty days of the Lenten season, the faithful go with Jesus into the desert. They step away from the noise and clamor of everyday life to seek God again, in desert places.

As the sparse, open spaces of the desert suggest, the season of Lent is best observed not by piling things on, but by simplifying. Lent is a time to empty ourselves. We empty our stomach by fasting. We empty our pockets by giving to others in a spirit of charity. We empty our mind of distractions and worries by turning to God in prayer. The self-emptying of Lent is undertaken so that the Risen Christ can fill us with his love and grace at Easter. As we listen to Lenten readings in the liturgy, we recognize anew that God knows the longings of our hearts and promises to fulfill them. He alone can provide for our deepest needs.

Lent has a mystical significance, too. During this season, we are put in touch with God's liberating power and will to save, shown in the Book of Exodus and witnessed in the life of Jesus. The story of Israel's journey into freedom

from Egypt will provide the backdrop for the powerful celebration of the Easter Vigil. As God's people were saved from slavery through the Exodus, so Christians are saved and set free by the sacraments of initiation. The forty days of Lent recall the forty years in the desert that formed God's people and led them to the Promised Land. As the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* explains, "The mystery of the 'exodus'... is always present in the lenten journey" (DPPL, 124).

Lent and the Liturgy

Throughout the season of Lent, the liturgy sets the tone of our Lenten observance. Because it is the public prayer of the Church, the liturgy is our primary way of sharing this time with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We may also share common activities, devotions, and prayer outside of the liturgy. Yet the liturgy remains the center, from which everything flows and to which everything returns.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LITURGY IN LENT

What is the liturgy of Lent like? It has a particular character, marked by restraint and sobriety. There is a certain austere beauty about Lent. Many expressions of joyful celebration that are usually found in the liturgy are suppressed during Lent. The alleluia is not sung. The *Gloria* is also omitted (except for the solemnities of the Annunciation and St. Joseph). There is no sprinkling with holy water at the beginning of Mass. Musical accompaniment for songs and hymns is scaled back. Church decorations are kept to a minimum.

The readings and prayers of the liturgy call us to deep conversion. The color purple, signifying penitence, is used for the vestments and for any hangings in the church. Those preparing for Baptism are brought to the forefront as special rites for them are celebrated on certain Sundays of Lent, and even on weekdays. Their presence reminds us that we are all on a spiritual journey together that leads to Easter.



ASH WEDNESDAY

The forty days of Lent begin on Ash Wednesday, with readings that call us to repentance. “Blow the trumpet in Zion! proclaim a fast, call an assembly;” the reading from Joel announces. In the liturgy of Ash Wednesday, the priest or minister traces the sign of the cross on our forehead with blessed ashes. The ashes are made by burning palm fronds from the previous year’s Palm Sunday liturgy. They remind us of our mortality and of the need to turn to God and live according to the Gospel. This simple ritual makes a profound statement about life, death, and Christian faith.

The practice of putting on ashes at the beginning of Lent originated in the Rhineland in the tenth century and came to Rome in the twelfth. The symbolism of putting on ashes is much older, however, going back to the Old and New Testaments. Ashes are a sign of mourning and sorrow, penitence and grief. To “put on sackcloth and ashes” is to become like one who is performing public penance for the forgiveness of sins. The liturgy of Ash Wednesday calls all believers to conversion.

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Each Sunday in Lent brings before us one or another aspect of the drama of salvation. The Gospel for this first Sunday, in all three years of the Lectionary cycle, tells of Jesus’ time in the desert, where he was tempted by Satan and yet chose to follow God’s way. It is a crucial confrontation. The Spirit

brings Jesus into the desert, just as the Spirit guides the Church into the season of Lent.

For adults and older children preparing for Baptism, this is a very special time. On or near the First Sunday of Lent, the diocesan bishop or his delegate celebrates the Rite of Election with those catechumens who are preparing to be baptized at Easter. The Rite of Election is part of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). This rite and all the rites of the catechumenate are based on ancient Christian practices.

Because the Rite of Election normally takes place in a diocesan setting, most parish communities with catechumens will celebrate a Rite of Sending. The catechumens are recognized and affirmed. After the Rite of Election they are known as the Elect, because they have been elected or chosen by God and the Church to receive the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. The whole Church is called to be specially mindful of the Elect throughout Lent, to pray for them and to walk with them toward the sacraments. Their presence reminds us of the importance of our own Baptism, which we will renew at Easter.

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

On the First Sunday of Lent we walked with Jesus into the desert. This Sunday we climb a mountain with him and see him in a new way. The Gospel for the Second Sunday of Lent tells the story of the Transfiguration. The disciples Peter, James, and John catch a glimpse of Jesus’ glory, as he converses with Moses and Elijah—the great Old Testament figures who represent the Law and the Prophets.

THE THIRD, FOURTH, AND FIFTH SUNDAYS OF LENT

The gospel readings for the last three Sundays of Lent are organized as a series whose theme is different in each year of the Lectionary cycle, Year A, Year B, and Year C.

In Year A, the theme is Baptism. The great stories from the Gospel according to John of the woman at the well, the

man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus bring forward the baptismal themes of water, light, and life. Christ is revealed as Savior through these powerful stories. In Year B, the theme is covenant and renewal of covenant. The Old Testament readings speak of the covenants God made with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and finally the new covenant—promised by Jeremiah and fulfilled in Christ. In Year C, the theme is reconciliation. The centerpiece of this series is the story of the Prodigal Son. It is flanked by two other gospel readings that develop this theme; one concerns judgment (the unproductive fig tree), and the other concerns mercy (the woman caught in adultery).

At Sunday Mass on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent, the Church celebrates rites of purification and enlightenment for the Elect. These rites of self-searching and repentance are called the Scrutinies. Prayers are offered for the Elect and the priest lays his hands on each one's head. When there are Elect in a parish, and the Scrutinies are celebrated, the readings from Year A are used.

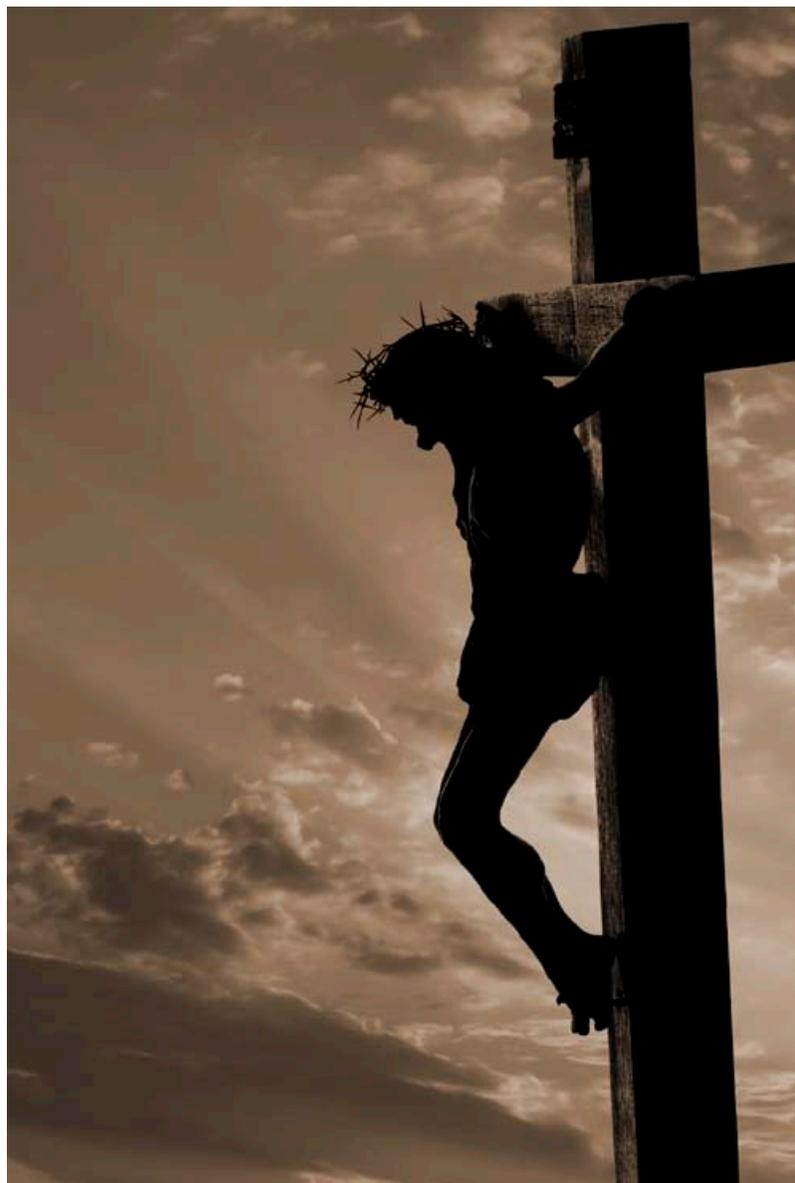
The giving of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer to the Elect also takes place during Lent, usually on a weekday. The presentation of the Creed follows the first Scrutiny. The presentation of the Lord's Prayer follows the third Scrutiny. In the presentations the Church hands on its living tradition of faith and prayer. A lasting treasure!

LAETARE SUNDAY

Are you feeling tired yet? The Fourth Sunday of Lent, Laetare Sunday, has traditionally offered a break from the somber tone of Lent. Rose-colored vestments may be worn, flowers may decorate the altar, and music may be more festive. All this is meant as an encouragement to stay the course after a month of Lenten self-denial and striving.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

"All glory, laud, and honor, to you, redeemer king!" The Church sings hymns of praise on this day, to welcome the Messiah. Jesus rode humbly into the ancient city of



Jerusalem, knowing he would give his life to bring God's plan to fulfillment. In the liturgy we remember his Passion, complete with all its paradoxes: the crowds who cheered and abandoned him, the disciples who loved and betrayed him, his own suffering and glory. Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. Although we are still in the season of Lent (Lent ends on Holy Thursday), the liturgical color for this day is red, the color of blood and martyrs. The liturgy of this Sunday begins with the reading of a short gospel passage telling the story of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. This is followed by a liturgical procession with palms. The proclamation of

the Passion on this day is taken from one of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, or Luke. (The Passion on Good Friday is from the Gospel according to John.)

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

The gift of forgiveness is one of the jewels of the Lenten season. The Sacrament of Penance may be celebrated in any season, of course, but Lent is a time when many parishes offer one or more communal celebrations of Reconciliation. In these liturgies, the readings and preaching speak of repentance and forgiveness. There is an examination of conscience, and usually there is time for individual confessions with absolution. The service closes with thanksgiving for God's mercy.

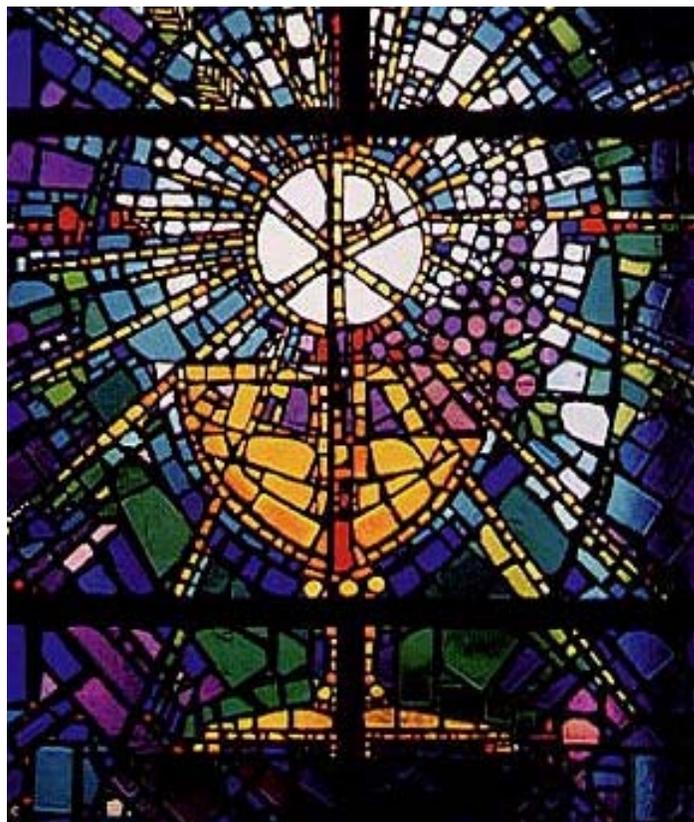
As the season of Lent unfolds, and we grow in awareness of God's goodness and the ways we have fallen short, it is natural to seek forgiveness for our sins through the Sacrament of Penance. Whether this sacrament is celebrated with a single penitent, or in the context of a communal service, it is always Christ himself who forgives, and gives us the grace to change our lives.

THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

What style of prayer nurtures your spirit? Are the psalms often on your lips and in your heart? Christian daily prayer throughout Lent is enriched with the penitential psalms. The great themes of Lent are woven through prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours. Some parishes take Lent as an opportunity to celebrate daily Morning and Evening Prayer, the two great hinges of the Liturgy of the Hours.

Lent and the Christian Life

Lent consists of more than just the liturgy, of course. As the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, a document of the Second Vatican Council, explains, "The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church." In order that we may take part in the liturgy meaningfully, we are called to faith and conversion.



We practice living as Christ commanded. Believers must continually be invited to "all the works of charity, piety, and the apostolate. For all these works make it clear that Christ's faithful, though not of this world, are to be the light of the world..." (CSL, 9).

There is a vital relationship therefore between the liturgy in Lent and participation in Lenten gatherings for prayer, faith sharing, reflection, and catechesis (such as the discipleship groups for *Living the Eucharist*). The liturgy is also linked with works of charity and justice, through which the faithful bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to our world. As the *General Directory for Catechesis* reminds us, "The Church desires to stir Christian hearts to 'the cause of justice' and to 'a preferential option or love for the poor,' so that her presence may really be light that shines and salt that cures" (GDC, 17).

As the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* points out, "Notwithstanding the secularization of contemporary society, the Christian faithful, during Lent, are clearly

conscious of the need to turn the mind towards those realities which really count, which require Gospel commitment and integrity of life which, through self-denial of those things which are superfluous, are translated into good works and solidarity with the poor and needy" (DPPL, 125). Gospel commitment and integrity of life are always in season, yet during Lent we look with special keenness to see where God is calling us today—and how we are responding.

Lent and Devotions

Devotions are a significant part of Lent for many Catholics. A devotion practiced with special fervor during Lent is the Stations of the Cross, or Way of the Cross (*Via Crucis*). The fourteen stations widely used today attained their form in the middle of the seventeenth century. Other forms of the Way of the Cross, such as the scriptural stations used by Blessed John Paul II, are also permitted. "In the *Via Crucis*, various strands of Christian piety coalesce: the idea of life being a journey or pilgrimage; as a passage from earthly exile to our true home in Heaven; the deep desire to be conformed to the Passion of Christ; the demands of following Christ, which imply that his disciples must follow behind the Master, daily carrying their own crosses (cf. Luke 9:23)" (DPPL, 133).

Other popular devotions associated with Lent include reading or acting out the Passion of Christ, Passion Plays, singing Lenten hymns, veneration of the cross and processions with the cross, devotions to the wounds of Christ or to one of the specific incidents of the Passion, and the *Via Matris*, based on the seven sorrows of Mary.

Although the sufferings of Christ are vividly recalled in many Lenten devotions, "The faithful should be taught to place the Cross in its essential reference to the Resurrection of Christ. ... In the Christian faith, the Cross is an expression of the triumph of Christ over the powers of darkness" (DPPL, 128). Jesus' Passion and sufferings are part of the whole mystery that cannot be fragmented, even though a devotion may focus on only a single element.

Lent in Secret

During the season of Lent, we renew our relationship with God and one another. We do this through experiences in common, but also through things we do when we are alone. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus tells us, "Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them" (Matthew 6:2). As important as it is to share in community life, to pray in common, and to work together to spread the Gospel, there is also a dimension of Lent that is kept in private or secret, something that is between you and God.

We must follow the advice of our Lord in the Gospel, who says "When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you... Do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing" (Matthew 6:2-3). His advice concerning prayer is similar: "When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret will repay you." As we observe Lent, there will be good works we do that no one knows, except God. There will be prayer when no one else is watching. It bears fruit in the intimate relationship of the soul with God.

Here's another example. The whole Church keeps a fast (according to each one's ability) only on two days: Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Yet fasting is something one can practice at any time, as a personal spiritual discipline. Catholics are to abstain from meat on the Fridays of Lent, yet may also choose to give up other foods as well, or to extend this discipline to other days of the week. Whatever personal discipline one undertakes, the focus should always be on God.

Fasting is not the same as a diet. Its purpose is spiritual. As the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* explains: "The practice of fasting, characteristic of the lenten season since antiquity, is an 'exercise' which frees the faithful from earthly concerns so as to discover the life that comes from above: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' (cf. Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4; Communion Rite antiphon for the First Sunday of Lent)" (DPPL, 126).

The Relationship of Lent to Easter & the Easter Season

On Holy Thursday, when the Lenten season ends and the Triduum begins, the liturgy marks the change vividly. At the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening, the vestments and altar coverings are no longer purple. Instead, they are festive white. The *Gloria* returns, accompanied by the ringing of bells! We must wait for the *Alleluia*, which returns at the Easter Vigil, yet there is clearly a new atmosphere, different from Lent.

OK, so the liturgy changes. What about us? Here's the proposition: If we have entered deeply into the spirit of Lent, Easter brings with it an abundant joy that we would never experience otherwise. The celebration of Easter *blossoms* for us in some remarkable ways—as we are renewed in hope, charity, wonder, awe, and faith. Churches are filled with flowers at Easter because they are a sign of new life. But the greatest sign of new life at Easter is



Baptism. The newly baptized, and those who have renewed their baptismal promises, are the true “flowering plants” of the Easter season.

Here's how it works. For forty days we've followed the disciplines of Lent: praying, fasting, and giving alms. We've gotten down to basics. We've asked for forgiveness of our sins. Maybe we've repaired some wounded relationships, and done some forgiving ourselves. We've realized how blessed we are to have a relationship with a God who loves us, to have the grace of the sacraments, God's holy Word, and a community of faith to walk with us. We've strengthened our discipleship, by turning outward to the world around us. We've also remembered that we must carry our own cross to follow the Lord. These are movements of faith. What we may not realize immediately during Lent, however, is that *all these movements of faith are building up to something*.

That something is Easter—Easter within us, Easter among us, and Easter in the whole wide world. Even nature takes part in the celebration, as the date of Easter depends on the sun and the moon, in the coming of the Spring equinox in the northern hemisphere! When we celebrate the Paschal Triduum, something profound happens, for which Lent has made us ready. The Lenten fast makes us *hungry* for the *feast* of Easter.

Our church documents tell us that the Paschal Triduum is the high point of the whole liturgical year. These are our high holy days. Three days of grace. The Triduum begins with the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, continues through the celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday, reaches its climax at the Easter Vigil on the night of Holy Saturday, and spills over into the Masses of Easter day. It finally winds to a close with Evening Prayer on Easter Sunday.

Christ's Passover from death to life, his Paschal Mystery, is remembered and made present in these liturgies through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Paschal Triduum is not merely commemorated as something that happened to Jesus in Palestine, long, long ago. Rather, by God's grace, we celebrate Christ's Passover as our own story, today. Christ is in us,

and we are in him. His victory is ours. As Saint Paul says in his Letter to the Romans, “We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

Christ’s presence and redeeming work in our lives is lifted up and celebrated through the signs, symbols, and sacred actions that make up the Triduum. If we have given ourselves in service and works of charity, the washing of the feet tells our story. If we have “died to self” by living a life for others and by accepting suffering in faith, the veneration of the cross tells our story. If we have “kept vigil” in this life, by placing our faith and hope in Christ, the Easter Vigil too is our own story. Each of our individual personal stories is imperfect and unfinished, of course. But those imperfections do not hold us back at Easter, because together we are caught up in the victory of Christ, whose self-offering is complete and sufficient for all time.

At Easter the Church proclaims that Christ is risen. Because Christ is risen, we too can live in newness of life. The first gift of Jesus to his disciples is the bestowal of the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). The Easter season then allows the Church a full fifty days to celebrate the Spirit, to rejoice in the Spirit’s presence in our lives, and to affirm in the gifts of the Risen Christ in Word and Sacrament, especially in the Eucharist. It’s a festive time, a season to celebrate the Resurrection and revel in all that it means for Christian believers—new life, hope, joy, and freedom. The Church gives us forty days of fasting, but *fifty* days of feasting, because Christian life is more about rejoicing than it is about sorrow, more about grace than it is about sin. The Easter season extends the joy that emerged in the Triduum over a whole season, up to the celebration of Pentecost.

QUESTIONS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

1 ■ What attracts you to the Lenten season?

What do you find difficult or off-putting about Lent? What mood or theme do you most strongly associate with Lent at this time in your life?

2 ■ How does the liturgy in Lent mark the season for you? What message or messages do you hear through the liturgies of the Lenten season? How do you respond?

3 ■ Do you generally favor Lenten practices that you share with others, or ones that you pursue on your own? What kind of Lenten experiences “feed” you? Are you open to new experiences?

4 ■ Have you ever passed a Lent in which you did nothing at all to engage with the season? What did Easter feel like after such a Lent? Now recall a Lenten season when you felt engaged and actively took part in the season in some way. What was Easter like after that experience?

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