



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## LENT

If you were charged and jailed for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? What a great question to consider during the sacred season of Lent! If your children were asked to give five examples of evidence that God is central to your family, what responses would they offer? What sacred space, time, and practices do you create for your family in order to pass on a heritage of faith? Your role as primary evangelizer challenges you to give to your children a sense of the sacred, knowledge of God, and formation in faith and morals that transcend the popular culture. We live in a culture that markets materialism, individualism, drugs, sex, and violence. We must choose to be countercultural by nurturing the spirit; fostering community; and practicing the moral virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. You teach this, both formally and informally, as you create family spiritual heritage. This newsletter explores possibilities for cultivating character within the context of the liturgical season of Lent.

Through the liturgical seasons, the Church leads us to “re-read and re-live the great events of salvation history in the ‘today’ of her liturgy” (CCC #1095). During a season of 40 weekdays from Ash Wednesday until Holy Thursday, we contemplate the passion, crucifixion, and death of Jesus. We face our own sinfulness and need for repentance. We imitate Jesus, who went into the wilderness for 40 days to fast and pray before he began the public ministry that led to his crucifixion. With violet/purple colors to focus us, we enter into a season of penance as a preparation for the eventual commemoration of the Passion of Christ and the feast of the Resurrection.

Lent begins with the sobering imperatives of **Ash Wednesday**: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return” and “Repent and believe the Good News.” The Gospel of Ash Wednesday sets the direction for the season. Jesus challenged his audience to almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, and gave the caution to “Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them” (Mt. 6:1-6, 16-18). The Scripture readings for the successive days in Lent describe true fasting; change of heart; carrying your cross; loving your enemies; being compassionate and forgiving; making justice your aim; and, in short, modeling ourselves on Jesus.

The last Sunday of Lent, **Passion Sunday/Palm Sunday**, is the doorway to **Holy Week** with the **Triduum** beginning at dusk on Holy Thursday and ending on Easter Sunday. On Passion Sunday Jesus was hailed as king; the people could not do enough for him. Five days later those same people yelled, “Crucify him!” Jesus remained consistent regardless of the environment or reception of people. That is but one of many lessons to learn from Palm Sunday (Jn. 12:12-19). On **Holy Thursday** Christians re-live the Last Supper. Jesus’ conversation at the supper was packed with significance since he knew it would be the last conversation before his death. Take time to read slowly the words he offered for the formation of your soul (John 13-17). Apply the message to your present life. In quiet hours of adoration at an **Altar of Repose** take the place of the Apostles who slept while Jesus suffered his agony in the garden. Observe him before the illegal trial of the Sanhedrin. See through his eyes and feel what he felt and compare that to his responses (Jn. 18:1-27). Make **Good Friday** reflective. Participate in the liturgy and **veneration of the Cross**. Witness Jesus before Pilate (Jn. 18:28-40) and accompany him to Calvary (Jn. 19:1-37). Through every event watch and hear what was done to Jesus and learn from his response. Vigil with his mother as she holds his dead body and buries him, filled with sorrow but without bitterness (Jn. 19:38-42). Finally, let yourself feel the emptiness of Friday evening and Saturday, the void caused by the death of Jesus. Teach these lessons to your children. Enter into the Paschal mysteries together.

**PRAYER – Deepen your relationship with Jesus; speak and listen; develop a recollected spirit; and walk with Jesus to his crucifixion and burial.**

- Participate in weekday Mass and discuss the Scriptures for the day.
- Read the Gospel of the day at a family time. Discuss it or pause for a full minute of silence.
- Meditate on the sorrowful mysteries of the Rosary.
- Stop all activity, dim house lights, and play Lenten music 15 minutes before bedtime.
- Pray the Stations of the Cross.
- Keep a child’s version of the Stations of the Cross at the family prayer center or at the center of the meal table. Feature one Station a day by putting a picture of it on a table easel where it can be seen easily. Teach your children to put themselves into the picture and to talk with Jesus about what is happening. For instance, the first Station: Jesus is condemned to death. Be Pilate because sometimes you judge others unjustly. Or be an official or soldier who is present for the interrogation because sometimes you stand by and watch injustice. Or be the chief priest who handed Jesus over and demanded his death because sometimes you are. Or ask Jesus to help you to know how to respond when you feel picked on, misjudged, or treated unfairly.
- Make the Good Friday hours of 12-3 p.m. solemn. Eliminate TV, stereo, Internet, etc. Create a mini-retreat experience for your children. Participate in church services if possible.
- Plan a veneration of the family crucifix.

**FASTING – Make efforts to acquire “mastery over your instincts and freedom of heart” (CCC. #2043) through voluntary acts of self-denial.**

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of fast and abstinence, and all Fridays of Lent are days of abstinence. **Fasting**, limiting oneself to one full meal and two light meals if necessary to maintain strength, obliges all between the ages of 19 and 59 on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. **Abstinence**, refraining from eating meat, begins at age 14 and includes all the Fridays of Lent, Ash Wednesday, and Good Friday.

Fasting can also be a spiritual exercise that has no age limit. Teach your children an authentic sense of penance and encourage them to do acts of penance suitable to their age, i.e., deny themselves first place in a game; deny themselves a favorite TV show to make time for a prayer practice; or do a hidden act of kindness, uniting each

gesture with Jesus in his Passion and his mission. As a family, expand your understanding of fasting to include holy deeds that cost your time and preferences for the good of others. For example:

- Meditate on Isaiah 58:6-10. Apply its message to daily living:  
This, rather is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. . . remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech, and satisfy the afflicted.
- Eliminate a life-blocker attitude by exercising its companion virtue. For instance, William Arthur Ward suggested this:  
Fast from discontent; feast on gratitude.  
Fast from anger; feast on patience.  
Fast from pessimism; feast on optimism.  
Fast from complaining; feast on appreciation.  
Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness.  
Fast from self-concern; feast on compassion for others.  
Fast from discouragement; feast on hope.  
Fast from idle gossip; feast on purposeful silence.

**ALMSGIVING – Share with others in need as an expression of love for God: “. . . giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity; it is also a work of justice pleasing to God.” (CCC #2447)**

- Practice the spiritual works of mercy. Help children to recognize compassion. Identify how Jesus lived the spiritual works of mercy during his Passion: warn the sinner, instruct the ignorant, pray for the living and dead, forgive all injuries, bear wrongs patiently, and counsel the doubtful.
- Expand your understanding of the corporal works of mercy to move beyond literal interpretation. These are the corporal works of mercy: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick, shelter the homeless, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead. For example, in a literal sense, “Feed the hungry” includes giving food to a person or to a food drive; helping in a food pantry/kitchen; or making a financial donation. It also includes viewing hunger as a need for friendship, acceptance, validation, appreciation, etc.

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