

# **Fasting for Lent: 11 ideas for what kids & teens can give up**

Fasting and abstinence are the practice of giving up something good (for example, eating meat or watching television) in order to turn away from sin and draw closer to God. It is not only a form of penance, but a spiritual discipline that helps us make room for God, strengthens our will, prepares us for mission, and puts us in solidarity with the suffering of Christ and suffering people around the world.

Besides observing the formal requirements for fasting and abstinence laid out by the Church, most Catholics traditionally choose additional penitential practices during Lent. Beginning at about age five or six, children can be encouraged to “give something up,” or to adopt a positive practice, as a way of entering into the spirit of Lent.

This type of fasting doesn’t need to be limited to the forty days of Lent, though. Your family may want to fast for a few days as a form of intense prayer for a special intention, such as a loved one who is gravely ill, or a crisis in the news.

## **Fasting ideas for kids and Teens**

When encouraging your kids to fast, help them brainstorm some creative ideas. A positive experience is more likely if you make the fast concrete and measurable. For example, instead of just saying, “I’ll stop fighting with my sister,” sit down and figure out specific actions that will lead to a “conversion” in this area. What causes the fighting? If the problem is borrowing clothes without permission, make that part of the fast. A chart or special jar (with coins or marbles to mark achievement) might also help your kids keep on track.

Here are some ideas for things your kids can give up or take on for Lent:

## **1. Give up the usual suspects.**

Sweets, video games, soda, junk food, social media, and other creature comforts.

## **2. Quiet it down.**

Monks practice silence in order to better hear God. Your family can, too, by turning off radios and music players (maybe just in the car), turning off the television, eating a meal in silence (or while listening to some sacred reading), practicing [Thirty Seconds of Silence](#), being silent for the first fifteen minutes of the morning, or even having a day of silence.

## **3. Make your room or home a desert.**

Jesus spent forty days in the desert. Kids and teens can imitate his example by making their room more desert-like as well, removing pictures and posters from walls, putting away rugs and comforters, emptying closets and dressers of all but the most essential outfits, throwing extra clutter (gadgets, trinkets, toys) in a box to be stored away.

## **4. Slim down your wardrobe.**

Kids can count up the number of outfits they have and select ten percent to wear during their fast. (For inspiration, read the stories of saints who gave away their clothes to the poor.) At the end of the fast, they can consider donating some of the clothes they didn't wear.

## **5. Perform a random act of kindness every day.**

Perform a different random act of kindness every day; doing it secretly makes it more fun. See [RandomActsOfKindness.org](http://RandomActsOfKindness.org) for ideas.

## **6. Write your fight.**

Older kids can cut down on sibling squabbling by committing to writing down their complaints rather than making them verbally. Print out “complaint forms” that include guidelines for rephrasing complaints using respectful language.

## **7. Pray it up.**

Teens and pre-teens can carry a rosary with them, using it to pray throughout the day. Any set of beads (such as a beaded necklace or bracelet) could be used to keep track of prayers.

## **8. Wear your faith.**

Kids can be encouraged to wear Christian symbols (a necklace, bracelet, or t-shirt) as a witness to their faith—and to remind them to live out their beliefs more consistently.

## **9. Share.**

Older kids who are especially possessive of their toys or bedroom space can be encouraged to share, actively and kindly, with their siblings. Or, encourage kids to share by donating the money they saved from their sacrifices (for example, giving up junk food) to a charitable cause.

## **10. Practice being present.**

Teens can commit to putting down their phone (or other electronic device) when someone is present with them. Even better: create phone-free zones (like the dinner table).

## **11. Get to know Jesus.**

Have kids read one of the Gospels in an age-appropriate Bible, or read it together as a family, over the course of Lent. The Gospel of Mark may be read in one long sitting.

# Why do we fast?

Here are some ways Christians think about fasting:

- **As penance.** Throughout the Old Testament, people covered themselves in ashes, took off their fine clothes, and fasted in order to express their repentance from sin. Fasting serves a similar purpose today.
- **Making room for God.** By emptying ourselves, even if just a little bit, we make room for God to enter our lives more fully. When fasting and abstinence are hard, we are moved to turn to God in prayer for help.
- **Strengthening the will.** Fasting is a spiritual discipline; just as physical exercise makes our body stronger, fasting strengthens our will. Practicing self-denial in small things strengthens our will to resist sin in other areas of our lives.
- **A preparation for mission.** For Christians, fasting imitates the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert. Just as Jesus used this time to prepare for his public mission, fasting prepares us to continue his mission in the world.
- **Solidarity with the suffering Christ.** Whatever small suffering we experience when we fast brings us closer to the suffering Christ—and all the people who suffer from hunger, malnutrition, and abuse on a daily basis.

## When do Catholics fast and abstain?

In the United States, the Church calls on Catholics ages eighteen through fifty-nine to the regular practice of fasting and abstinence from meat; pregnant and nursing mothers, as well as the sick, are exempted.

Fasting is defined as consuming only one full meal and, if necessary, two smaller meals (less than one full meal

combined) throughout the day, with no snacks between meals. Abstinence means not eating meat, such as poultry, beef, and pork. Fish, meat-based broths, eggs, butter, and other animal-derived products are allowed.

Adults are required to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, with the Good Friday fast ideally lasting through Saturday evening. In addition, everyone ages fourteen and older is required to abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and the Fridays of Lent. Abstaining from meat is strongly encouraged on all Fridays throughout the year, but not required as long as some other penitential practice replaces it (for example, giving up sweets or performing some charitable work).

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops posts information about fasting and abstinence requirements on the ["Fasting and Abstinence" page of its website, usccb.org.](https://www.usccb.org/fasting-and-abstinence)

## **Learn more**

- ▶ [Deuteronomy 9:9](#), 18, 25-29; 10:10; [1 Kings 19:7-18](#); [Daniel 9:1-19](#); [Jonah 3](#); [Matthew 4:1-11](#)
- ▶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #[1434](#), [1438](#), [2043](#)