

## **St. Michael's Lent (August 15<sup>th</sup> to September 29<sup>th</sup>): A Period of Fasting Observed By St. Francis of Assisi**

While St. Francis is widely known for his love of the poor and his great care of nature, he also possessed a deep interior life that was punctuated by frequent periods of prayer and fasting. He often stepped away from his community of brothers and sought solitude to deepen his relationship with God.

In 1224, two years before his death, Francis felt drawn to Mount La Verna and set out with a few of his closest brothers to spend a period of prayer and fasting on the mountain. St. Bonaventure records in his biography (written between 1260-1266) how Francis, “was brought after many and varied toils unto a high mountain apart, that is called Mount Alverna. When, according unto his wont he began to keep a Lent there, fasting, in honor of St. Michael Archangel, he was filled unto overflowing, and as never before, with the sweetness of heavenly contemplation.”

The Little Flowers of St. Francis, a collection of stories about St. Francis that was compiled during the 13th century, records these words of St. Francis to his brothers,

“My sons, we are drawing nigh to our forty days’ fast of St. Michael the Archangel; and I firmly believe that it is the will of God that we keep this fast in the mountain of Alvernia, the which by Divine dispensation hath been made ready for us, to the end that we may, through penance, merit from Christ the consolation of consecrating that blessed mountain to the honor and glory of God and of His glorious mother, the Virgin Mary, and of the holy angels.”

St. Bonaventure adds that, “Unto the Blessed Michael Archangel, — inasmuch as his is the ministry of bringing souls before God, — [Francis] cherished an especial love and devotion.”

This fast kept by St. Francis runs from the Solemnity of the Assumption (August 15) and ends on the feast of St. Michael (September 29). Similar to Lent that occurs before the feast of Easter, it excludes all Sundays. It was during this fast that St. Francis received the stigmata, the holy wounds of Jesus Christ. The traditional date for the reception of the stigmata is September 17, a few days day after the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (which is on September 14). It appears that this fast began with St. Francis and was spread by Franciscans through the 18th century. After that it received less attention, but in recent years has seen a revival among some Catholics.

Francis’ experience reminds us of the importance of fasting and spending time alone with God. These practices shouldn’t be reserved to the 40 days of Lent before Easter, but are applicable throughout the calendar year. We are always invited to draw closer to God, and St. Michael the Archangel is a powerful intercessor who stands ready to defeat our spiritual enemies so that we can embrace the freedom that is found in Jesus Christ.

## Gesturing Toward Renewal

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The Holy See's guidelines provide the structure for developing a true, spiritually healthy devotion to the Holy Angels based on two principles: Gratitude to God for the gift of the heavenly spirits and their service to man; and devotion arising from the knowledge that God uses his ministers, the Holy Angels, to guide and protect the faithful. The Holy See's guidelines also encourage individuals and families to pray the *Angele Dei* during their morning and evening prayers.

Fasting and prayers of gratitude and devotion in anticipation of the Feast of St. Michael (and another like it, the Feast of Guardian Angels on October 2nd)—in other words, St. Michael's Lent—would also be perfectly in line with the guidelines given by the Holy See.

If you're not sure how to express your gratitude in prayer, you could start by thanking God for the many aspects of our lives that are entrusted by the Church to the ministry of the Holy Angels:

- The prayers of the faithful
- The contrition of penitents
- The protection of the innocent from the assaults of the Malign One.
- The protection of the faithful as they sleep.
- The assistance to the faithful in their last agony
- The accompaniment the souls of the just into paradise
- The watching over of the graves of the just

Other ways to participate in the prayer aspect of St. Michael's Lent include:

- praying the Chaplet of St. Michael — a wonderful way to honor him and the other Holy Angels.
- The Chaplet can also be prayed as a novena starting nine days in advance of the Feast of St. Michael (see *Michaelmas*).
- Another option could be a daily or weekly private recitation of the Litany of the Holy Angels or Litany of the Holy Guardian Angel.

If you're looking for something to read and ponder over during St. Michael's Lent, or if you'd like to learn more about the life of St. Francis and his devotion to the Holy Angels, I recommend a wonderful collection of stories about him and his Franciscan brothers called [The Little Flowers of Saint Francis](#), translated by Cardinal Manning.

Deepening our faith does not require us to mortify our bodies as severely as St. Francis did to his own, but with him as our guide we can start to imagine how a year imbued with more periods of fasting and prayer could look. A new or renewed devotion to St. Michael and all the Holy Angels may be just what we need to strengthen our relationship with God and deepen our commitment to living the holy life God wants for all of us.