

Countdown to Lent

Can you believe that it will be Ash Wednesday in four days? Time passes by so quickly. It seems like the boxes of Christmas decorations just went back to the attic. And we were finally getting used to the green chasubles at Mass. But in a few short days we will see the purple vestments come back out. This time the purple is not for our Super Bowl-winning Ravens, but for the Season of Lent. Yes, Ash Wednesday is in sight, starting the Church's season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We take some time during the liturgical cycle to make sacrifices and repent for our sins.

Make a Plan: Preparing For Lent

The weeks since Christmas Break have gone by so quickly that I thought it might be a good thing to get my John Carroll students and faculty thinking early about their options for observing the sacred season this year. So I started on Wednesday—one week out—and challenged them to think outside-the-box and make a plan for observing a more spiritual Lent. Before opening prayer each morning I have given three ideas to get them thinking creatively to find a plan to which they can be faithful for the 40-day journey.



Some of the following suggestions come from Lifeteen, while others are traditional or from my own reflections. Maybe you will find something in this list of ideas to adopt to make your observance of Lent more spiritual this year. Many involve some level of sacrifice from comfort or luxury to an experience of solidarity with those who have far less than we have. All ideas are in random order.

25 Suggestions For a More-Spiritual Lent:

Part I: Give It Up!!

1. For generations Catholics and other Christians have given up desserts, snacks, and soft drinks for the 40-days of Lent. If you do this, donate the money you save from these items and from any snack-stops at Wawa, Dunkin Donuts, and Starbucks to the poor box at your parish or send a donation to Catholic Relief Services.
2. Give up all drinks, except for water, in solidarity with those who cannot afford coffee and specialty drinks. There are many people in the world who do not have clean water. Catholic Relief Services teaches how we can make a difference. Click on this link to learn more.
3. The Church teaches us that fasting should be as a big part of our Lenten practice, especially on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Perhaps you might consider fasting more often. Limiting the number of meals, eating only basic food items, and staying

away from alcohol might be part of your considerations. Coupled with prayer, fasting is an amazing spiritual experience. Saint Francis De Sales taught, "If you are able to fast, you will do well to observe some days beyond what are ordered by the Church." And Saint Alphonsus Ligouri said, "God has given us the goods of the earth, not only that we may enjoy them, but also that we may have the means of ... showing him our love by the voluntary renunciation of his gifts, and by the oblation of them to his glory. To abandon, for God's sake, all worldly enjoyments, has always been the practice of holy souls."

4. We know that the Church also teaches us to abstain from eating meat on the Fridays of Lent and on Ash Wednesday. Many of us remember when all Fridays were meatless days before 1966. About three years ago, one of my daughters gave up meat for the entire 40 days of Lent and found that it not only made her more health-conscious, since she is not a vegetarian, but it also gave her a better understanding of what the poor go through when there is not enough money to spend on burgers, chicken breasts, and steaks for their families. Meal planning is a constant reminder of what you are doing for Lent and why. Do you think you could give up meat for all the days of Lent?

5. Don't wear shoes, except for work and school, in honor of those who have no shoes from poor countries. One of our graduates from the Class of 2011 did her Senior Project on the Toms program "One Day Without Shoes." It made such an impact that Ellen took her efforts with her to college and sponsored this program at High Point.

6. Give up Facebook and other social media in order to nurture relationships through more personal face-to-face communications. Some young people agree that they waste a lot of time on Facebook that could be better spent on their studies. Their teachers and parents would support this effort, I am confident.



7. Give up listening to music in the car in order to be more in tune with God's presence in the silence and to appreciate His creation while driving. (See number 22.)

8. Though not for everyone, consider giving up the use of hot water in the shower to live in solidarity with those who have little to no water and have not ever had the luxury of a relaxing hot shower.

9. Again not for everyone, could you give up the use of your bed? I have read about some who have chosen to sleep on the floor in sleeping bags, while others slept on the sofa each night instead. I also read about a young person from wintery Canada who not only gave up his bed for the 40 days of Lent, but he slept outside in a tent in

solidarity with the homeless and wrote about it in his daily blog.

10. Can't give up your bed? Maybe you might consider giving up your pillow for Lent to experience discomfort in solidarity with those who have no pillows in so many places in our world.

11. Could you give up the complete use of your cell phone and its apps and text-messaging, except for emergency use? No checking email, Facebook, playing games, taking photos, and so on? This would definitely be a challenge for those of us with smart phones of any kinds.

12. How about giving up video games? Our young people especially might find this challenging. Replace the time spent on games in other productive ways: studying, quality family time, working on a project around the house, and so on.

13. Not a morning person? Try giving up the snooze button on your alarm clock to be better-disciplined. Practice makes perfect.

14. Ladies, could you give up make-up?

15. How about giving up watching television and movies for this sacred season? Replace that viewing with something more meaningful or important.

16. Music is such a big part of the culture in which we live, consider giving up your favorite playlists on your iPod and listen only to Christian music. There are lots of varieties available including Christian rock.

Part II: Go For It!!

Again most of my previous suggestions above have involved some level of sacrifice. Now I will give some ideas for proactive ways to spend Lent:

17. Improve your spirit of giving by doing random acts of kindness. I noticed this trend after the tragic deaths in Sandy Hook in December: People did random acts of kindness in honor of those who were killed. Some of the ideas listed on this blog brought tears to my eyes.

If you have ever had someone pay your toll at a bridge or pick up your lunch tab at a restaurant, you know that it was unexpected and made you smile. Pass on the goodness with which you have been blessed by doing spontaneous random acts of kindness.

18. In the same manner, schedule some volunteer hours at your local soup kitchen, food pantry, and other hands-on charitable organizations. Consider serving the daily hot meal at Catholic Charities' Our Daily Bread.

19. I love this idea: Make a list of 40 persons who have touched your life in a meaningful way and write a note/letter to one each day of Lent letting them know of the impact they have made on your life. People of all ages could do this and enjoy this reflection on good memories and gratitude for all the people on their list. The recipients will be overjoyed with the results. Just ask any teacher who has ever had a grateful note from a former student. Priceless.

20. Do you talk a lot? Maybe for Lent, you will try to be a better listener and tune into the thoughts, ideas, and concerns of those around you instead.

Can't stop talking? Make a few visits to elderly at the local assisted living facility or nursing home. So many of our elderly yearn for companionship.

21. Examine your gifts and talents: Then pass it on. I challenged our students in this manner: If you do well in Math, help tutor someone who is having a tough time. Play a musical instrument? Then encourage another person who is interested in learning and give them lessons. Talented in your sport? Show another person how to better their athletic skills. Are you super-organized? Help another person straighten out their locker and binder, and get them on a better path for academic success. There are a multitude of ways to pass on your God-given gifts and talents to those around you.

Prayer, Mass, and Reconciliation:

22. Saint Louis De Monfort said, "The Rosary is a priceless treasure inspired by God." Pray the rosary for the special intentions of a different friend or family member each day of Lent. Some say that it takes thirty days to form a habit. What better habit to form than praying the rosary? Think you don't have enough time? Try praying the rosary while you drive. (See number 7.)

Pope Saint Pius X shared: "Of all prayers, the rosary is the most beautiful and the richest in graces.... Therefore, love the Rosary and recite it every day with devotion: this is the testament which I leave unto you so that you may remember me by it." Print out this rosary guide to help you with the mysteries and prayers, if needed.

23. Consider going to Mass more often during Lent. Our parishes see a greater number attending daily morning (or lunch hour, where available) Mass during both Advent and Lent. The Mass aids that are available now are a wonderful way to enter more deeply into the liturgical celebration during all seasons of the Church Year. Many of us carried our personal missals or breviaries with us to Mass. Now there are many other options available to enhance your experience of worship. I have subscribed to "Magnificat" since it first came out over ten years ago. It not only includes the readings and prayers for daily Mass, but also has morning and evening prayer, writings of the saints, and information on each holy day or patron saint. Eighteen months ago another similar Mass aid, "Give Us This Day," was offered by Liturgical Press. My husband gave me a two-year subscription for Christmas. I use both of them for personal and school prayer. Each softbound book is filled with excellent helps to assist us during prayer and Mass. And both companies offer a free sample, as well as online options and apps for your smart phones and iPads.

24. Participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation during this sacred season. The

Archdiocese of Baltimore started a wonderful program in 2011 called “The Light is on for You” to encourage Catholics to reconnect with the sacrament during Lent. This link has some great resources and guides for preparing to celebrate this wonderful sacrament of spiritual healing and renewal.



25. Let’s leave this last idea open-ended and unspoken. You know yourself better than anyone else. You know what you need to do to put God first and to honor and help those around you. You know what you could do to better the condition of those who are less-fortunate. And only you know best if you need to re-prioritize your life. Take some time over the last few days before the distractions of Mardi Gras to make an age-appropriate personal plan and put it into action starting on Ash Wednesday. You will be a better person for making the time and effort to get closer to God through your sacrifices and works of mercy.

My Plans for Lent:

Last year I did several private devotions each day, but I also did a more-public spiritual work of mercy by randomly selecting two people from my vast Facebook network each day and offering prayers and random acts of kindness in their honor. By posting this publicly it made me accountable to them and to my prayerful efforts. And in the resulting connection with these persons I found that many were in definite need of special prayers at that very time. There are no coincidences with God. I also found that a good number promised to pass on the prayers to those in their lives who were in need. Passing-it-on is always a Win-Win for everyone involved in good works. I plan to continue this effort this Lent.

Not Like a New Year’s Resolution.

Always remember, if you don’t succeed in sticking to your plan each day, don’t give up as one might with a New Year’s resolution. Just put your best foot forward the next day and try again.

I have had some students and colleagues tell me over the years that they forgot about no-meat on Friday. I tell them not to panic, rather try to stay away from meat on Saturday that week and try to remember the following Friday.

The Church advocates all Fridays as special days of sacrifice in union with our Lord’s ultimate sacrifice for us on Good Friday. We are taught that all Fridays should be days of prayer and sacrifice year-round. The U.S. Bishops Pastoral Statement on Penance and Abstinence is a great read.

God loves our efforts to be better and holier people. I am certain that He will give us the graces we need to be faithful to Him in all areas of our lives during Lent and all

the sacred seasons of the Church Year.

God is Good!! All the Time!!

