

Let subtraction put you ahead during Lent

The journey of the season of Lent always includes my own journeying around the archdiocese. On Ash Wednesday I had Masses for the students at Maryvale, and later a Mass at Annunciation Parish. The first weekend of Lent I had the privilege of leading a parish mission at St. Joseph in Sykesville.

In all of those places, I made a suggestion for a different kind of Lenten penance. Since Lent is still relatively young, you might find these suggestions helpful in your own life.

Lent always highlights three things: prayer, fasting and giving alms.

We are all familiar with prayer. Prayer is our conversation with God. We can do that in formal prayers, or in private conversation with God. I always liked the story of the little girl who was asked if she said her night prayers. She replied: "I started to. But then I thought to myself: 'I bet God gets tired of hearing all these prayers,' so I told God the story of the three bears!"

That little girl got it. Prayer is telling God the story of our lives and inviting God into our lives.

Fasting is typically giving up some amount of food. We might limit our food each day of Lent to one large meal and two smaller meals.

But there's another way to look at 'giving up.' What if we decided to give up negativity? One of the suggestions I made was to give up saying one negative thing each day. For example, if you're going to say 20 negative things to your brother each day, for Lent only say 19! Don't say the one negative comment.

Giving alms, obviously, involves giving of what we have to help someone else. I've always loved the definition of stewardship: "Stewardship is what you do with what you have when you believe in God."

But have we ever thought of giving praise or compliments each day. If we are going to subtract one negative thing each day, why not compliment each person in our family each day. Find something each day to praise your father, mother, sister, brother or anyone else in your circle of family or friends. "You look wonderful, Mom." "You're great Dad!"

Each day for the rest of Lent find something to praise each person for. The idea came from an article I read years ago. A woman had decided to divorce her husband. However, before she divorced him, she decided to spend a 30-day period in which she found something to praise him for every day and refrained from criticizing him each day.

At the end of 30 days, he was a different person. She didn't divorce him! But who had changed? She had changed, and, therefore, he had the opportunity to be different as well.

We don't change the world by changing someone else. We change the world by changing ourselves. If we are putting out negative energy, it will be reflected back to us. If we are putting out positive energy, that will come back to us as well.

We can go through life reacting to what happens to us and ending up frustrated, angry or depressed. Or we can go through life creating the energy field around us.

If we subtract one negative comment and offer a compliment to each person in our lives for the rest of Lent, we will have a new family on Easter. The family will be different because we are different. We work miracles, not by trying to change someone else, but by changing ourselves!