

# Think outside the box: Creative suggestions for a more spiritual Lent



As always, time is flying by. The circle of the liturgical calendar, like the circle of life, keeps moving forward. No sooner than the Christmas decorations have been put away, the green of Ordinary Time made a brief appearance, only to be replaced tomorrow by purple.

Yes, tomorrow is Ash Wednesday and the start to the Lenten season of prayer and repentance. We are called anew to put our faith first and focus on making right all that holds us back from a life of God's grace. And this Jubilee Year of Mercy is the perfect time to consider taking a deeper look at our spiritual lives.

## **Make a personal plan for Lent:**

Three years ago, before I retired as the Campus Minister at John Carroll, I challenged my students and faculty to think outside the box in planning for a more spiritual Lent. You too can have a more spiritual 40-day journey if you observe this sacred season with a heart committed to renewal.

Today I'm offering another look at the 25 suggestions I gave the John Carroll community for a more spiritual Lent.

Some of my 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 richer 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.

## **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 abstaining from these items and from avoiding snack-stops at places like 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 Liguori 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. One of my daughters gave up meat for the entire 40 days of Lent when she was in college 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. A John Carroll grad 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 University.

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 and Instagram 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 close to sleep 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? Just use your cell in case of emergency? No checking email, Facebook, playing games, taking photos, and so on? This would definitely be a challenge for those of us with smart phones.

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 using make-up? Let your natural beauty, both internal and external, shine out!

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

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.

When we allow spiritual music to become an "earworm," running continually through your mind, it becomes a time of prayer.

## **Part II: Go for it!**

Most of my suggestions above have involved some level of sacrifice.

Below, 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 at Sandy Hook Elementary.

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. Give thanks:

Make a list of 40 persons who have touched your life in a meaningful way and write a note of thanks to one of them each day of Lent. Let them know 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 often challenged my 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.)

Think of the wisdom of Pope Saint Pius X: "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 of people attending daily morning (or lunch hour, where available) Masses during both Advent and Lent.

The Mass aids that are available 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 almost fifteen 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.

Five years ago, another similar Mass aid, *"Give Us This Day,"* was offered by Liturgical Press. My husband gave me a two-year subscription for Christmas a few years ago. I used both prayer books for personal and school use. Each softbound volume is filled with excellent helps to assist us during both prayer time 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 from the U.S. Catholic Bishops 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 to think and make an age-appropriate personal plan and put that plan into action on Ash Wednesday.



### **In the end:**

You will be a better person for making the time and effort to get closer to God through your sacrifices and works of mercy.

Always remember, if you don't succeed in sticking to your plan each day, don't give up as one might abandon 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 grace we need to be more faithful to Him in all areas of our lives during Lent and all the sacred seasons of the Church Year.

Never forget: God is good... All the Time!