

Parish Practice: A Good Lent Takes Planning

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Good will abounds on Ash Wednesday. Church pews teem with eager participants. They come not to celebrate a victory, not to meet new friends, not to share good news, not to eat and drink - but to confess that they are sinners and to wear a public badge of their repentance.

Parish staffs have their hands full on Ash Wednesday, and they fear that many of the newly repentant will slip through their fingers. In truth, the numbers who appear at midweek will not return for all the Sundays of Lent. But they sincerely hunger for a spiritual experience, and they find it in church on this day year after year. Parish leaders may try to convince those who receive ashes that the church has a rich fare available to those who frequent its board.

A typical parish offers many opportunities for the faithful to keep a good Lent: daily mass, stations of the cross, the sacrament of reconciliation, and evenings of catechesis, for example. However, many of those who go to church at the start of Lent lack the motivation to return multiple times throughout the season.

In addition to events taking place on site, parish leadership may provide a spiritual aid for people to take with them. The faithful who cannot make more time for devotional activities at church may find a space for them at home. After a good Ash Wednesday, they may be ready for something more, if they can only fit it into a busy life.

In my parish, I offer people copies of my booklet, *What Am I Doing for Lent This Year?* It gives our churchgoers some nourishment for the spiritual hunger that drew them through the wintry streets to burn their foreheads with ash.

The booklet challenges its readers to make a personal plan for Lent. It reminds Catholics about the minimal requirements of the season, but helps them step more deeply into these generic rules with very specific actions.

To start, people reflect on the past year. They take stock of their relationships with God and their neighbor. They think about their contributions to the community. They reflect on any significant events pertaining to health, finances, employment or school. They make notes about how the past year has gone, and how the next year might need some work.

After that, they pray over the gospel passage of Ash Wednesday (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18). In those verses, Jesus hands his first disciples a spiritual plan of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Today's disciples then meditate on these ideas one by one.

They consider their spiritual lives. They critique first of all their commitment to Sunday mass, as well as their programme of personal prayer. They consider other ways to enhance their prayer life over the next six weeks of Lent.

They think about fasting. When most people hear of Lent, they imagine this single aspect of Jesus' three-part plan: You give up things for Lent. Readers of the booklet do think of ways to fast from food, but they also challenge themselves to fast from habits and activities that may be impeding their spiritual growth.

They reflect on almsgiving. Contributing to charity is always a good habit, but there are other ways to spend one's resources for the sake of others. People may give their time to a needy neighbor. They may donate their talents to some who cannot afford them. They may more generously share their treasure at the parish church, their favorite charitable organizations, or even when leaving a tip.

Once people have thought about various ways they can live out Jesus' spiritual plan, they return to the introductory assessment of their personal lives. They make practical associations with the passage from Matthew's gospel. If their relationship with God has been rocky, they may devote themselves to a specific kind of daily prayer. If they need to give more attention to their health, they may choose to fast from certain foods and drink. If they have not spent sufficient time with the people who rely on them, they may perform the almsgiving of personal presence.

Having weighed all these options, they write down an appropriate plan for the season of Lent, something challenging, but feasible. Then they keep a calendar for six weeks to check how well they are observing their hopes day by day.

In parishes, this entire exercise can be done in small groups. People who meet together and share their plan for Lent will find additional support from a community of friends or family. They will encourage one another in the difficult task of keeping this long season, and they will affirm the growth they witness in others.

The liturgy of the church naturally offers plenty of opportunities to extend the initial good will of Ash Wednesday. Catechumens publicly demonstrate the hunger for spiritual growth. The presidential prayers at mass frequently refer to the practices of fasting and penitence.

After people have thought deeply about their shortcomings, and have been working on improvements, the sacrament of reconciliation becomes a natural spiritual step. Participants in these Lenten exercises have already completed a thorough examination of conscience. Now they may formally seek the sacramental forgiveness that the church mercifully offers.

The climax of a good Lent in any parish is the Easter Vigil. Those who have made the long journey cross the final threshold behind the light of the paschal candle. That candle, shattering the darkness of sin and death, shimmers with the hope of new life. After witnessing the baptism of catechumens, the faithful renew their own baptismal promises. With these words, all of Lent reaches its final stage. Having evaluated the past year, having struggled with the demons of temptation, having persevered with others in the parish community, the faithful

hear questions asking for commitment: “Do you renounce Satan? And all his works? And all his empty show?” And then, “Do you believe?”

Those questions gather up the faithful who appeared in the dark and cold of Ash Wednesday, and carry them into the light and warmth of Easter. They invite Christians to declare publicly that sin has died, and Christ lives.

A booklet with space for journaling provides one more advantage. It gives people a starting point for next year. Before they present themselves again for the ashes of repentance, they may look back on the concerns of the year before. If Lent has had its effect, they will discover the presence of the risen Christ, who guides them year after year.

To do

- * **Select a spiritual aid that people can bring home.**
- * **Make it available on Ash Wednesday.**
- * **Provide opportunities for groups to talk about Lent together.**

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