

TEN SUGGESTIONS FOR A LENTEN RETREAT

The Lenten season begins on Ash Wednesday with the Ritual of Ashes. Lent is a forty day period, during which we remember in spirit the forty days Jesus spent in the desert. Of course, none of us can take off to a desert for forty days and even if we could we would probably choose to go to other places. But, all is not lost. All of us, with proper motivation, cooperation and with God's grace can conduct our own *Forty Day Retreat* in our own surroundings. I can almost immediately hear some of you shout back at me: "*Not in my surroundings. You ought to visit our crazy home with young children and teenagers running all over the place. Then add to that my crazy work schedule.*"

I hear you almost. I say "almost" because, lets face it, I don't know your schedule or the stresses of your life. But, I know some people who live awfully busy lives and yet have managed to allow God to be very much a part and parcel of all that they do. So we know busyness doesn't need to exclude spirituality.

Obviously, those of us who live alone or are retired or have no children living at home, have a big advantage over families (especially single parent families with young children).

When Jesus went off to the desert, his goal, I presume, was to be *totally available to God* before he embarked on his Public Mission. This Lent you and I are invited to make a special effort to make ourselves as available to God as possible, to allow God to come closer to our heart so that his ways can become our ways.

Any or all of the following suggestions would allow God to come closer to our hearts this Lent.

Suggestion #1: If possible, give God some time early in your day.

I deliberately say "if possible" because I am sure some of you hit the floor running. If you wake up to a radio, it is certainly possible to fast from this during Lent. If you are usually up an hour before the kids, is it possible to sit quietly for five minutes and be as present as you can to the One "in whom we live, move and have our being"? If you don't have kids to get ready for school and if you are retired you are certainly in a better position to start your day with God (and coffee). I realize some of you may have a spouse who insists that the radio or TV. must be on first thing in the morning. In that case, do what you can to find a quiet spot. Go sit on your roof. God doesn't ask the impossible of us.

During the morning quiet time ask God to help you to "put on a Christ like mindset" that you can carry with you through the day. This may be a huge challenge, but surely one worth seeking and praying for. Starting our day with a God-centered mindset is surely a wonderful way to approach whatever lies ahead. As someone said "*God and I are an overwhelmingly majority.*" Those of us with more control over our lives can choose to begin our day with 15 or 30 minutes of quiet prayer and reading. I know many of you already do this—so no challenge for you in this area. If you drive to work, you could choose to leave the radio off, thereby, creating a 'pocket of silence for God'. If you bring your children to school, make prayer a part of the ride. Perhaps listening to Christian music helps to get your day off to a good start. Be creative but try very hard to be present to God and Jesus sometimes during the first hour or two of your day.

Suggestion #2: Practice Mindfulness of God's Presence as you move through the day.

This suggestion is possible for all of us no matter how hectic our lives are. All it takes is practice, practice and more practice. Frankly, I don't know of an easy way to develop this attitude other than by working at it. Developing the attitude of mindfulness to God's presence will help us to be Christ like in our attitudes and behavior in all we encounter. If you want to read a small spiritual classic on this, read Brother Lawrence's book called *Practicing the Presence of God*.

Suggestion #3: Do a Little Fasting

Some people fast from a certain type of food from the whole of Lent. But, we can fast in a variety of ways. We might choose one day a week to eat lightly or abstain from a food or beverage that we really like. Letting ourselves *feel hungry* is good if for no other reason than to have some sense of what millions of our brothers and sisters feel *daily* in

underdeveloped nations. The late Bishop Utener once wrote: “fasting in itself doesn’t *make* things right. But, it can help us to *see* what things need to be made right.” For example, fasting for a blood test doesn’t make things right. It clears the way to see what needs to be set right. It’s the same with Lenten fasting. When we clear food out of our lives, we clear the way for a spiritual blood test. We may be surprised what we discover: e.g., how addicted we are to food, how our lives revolve around food, how we fill the empty feeling within with food. We may even get in touch with our previously *unfelt* need for God. Also, fasting from all forms of gossip, workaholic tendencies and some television would be an excellent Lenten fast.

Suggestion #4: Almsgiving

Almsgiving is an ancient religious practice. It is proposed by all religions. It invites us to share our blessings with those least blessed than ourselves. It reminds us of our responsibility to be our brothers-keeper. We all know that there are people who ‘milk the system’ and poor people who are probably lazy and would prefer to beg than work. But, when we meet a poor person this Lent, let us fast from judgments about whether they are among the ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ poor. Let’s just give them a few dollars, let’s err on the side of charity. Or better still let’s take a few minutes to *listen* to them without judging if they are telling the truth or not.

In addition to that, if our finances allow us, we can give a donation to a favorite charity. But, taking time to interact, however briefly, with a homeless person, shake their hand, look them in the eye, might become a bigger spiritual blessing for us than a big check that doesn’t allow us to try to see the face of the wounded Christ in a brother and sister who is homeless because he/she is mentally ill and did not have the help needed to stay off the streets. Surely one of the worst curses of our busyness is that we are always in such a rush to go somewhere else that we are blind to the needy in our midst. If we stopped, but once this Lent to interact with one very unkempt homeless person we may be surprised what that encounter may do for us.

Suggestion #5: Receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation

“Confession is good for the soul” is an old but true saying. Invariably, we feel better after we do it—especially if we have made a sincere effort to prepare well. We often say prayer is a way to draw closer to God. Perhaps, it might be more accurate to say prayer is a way to *let God draw closer* to us. So often we unconsciously keep God at a distance—especially when we rattle off rote prayers which lack any real feeling or thoughts from the heart. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we have a great opportunity to let God draw close to us and wash us over with his merciful love.

Suggestion #6: Confront A Idol in our Lives and Restore it to its Creature Status.

Nothing God created is bad. On the contrary, it is all good and can lead us to God. The problem arises when we give other persons or things, or even ourselves a god-like status. Few, if any of us set out to do this. It just crawls up on us. Suddenly, someone or thing becomes more important to us than God. We can usually get at the potential or real idols in our lives by looking at how we spend our free time or money. Also, look at the stuff we daydream about and or maybe talk a lot about. Perhaps this Lent we can look at one thing that takes up so much of our time and energy that it most likely has become an idol in our lives.

Suggestion #7: Forgive an old grudge, hurt or let go some burden

I deliberately say to forgive or let go of an “old” grudge because recent ones may just be too hard for us to forgive right now. I often say to people: “It is okay to be as mad as hell about a hurt. The question is: How long do you want to be mad about this hurt? Do you want to be mad five or ten or twenty years?” Some people hold onto a grudge for years. It is like a precious possession that they do not want to let go. I’m sure you have heard the definition of Irish Alzheimer’s. “They forget everything but the grudges.” So are you still harboring an old grudge? If so, might this Lent be the time to “bury the hatchet”. Can you imagine the shape we would be in if God held onto our sins as we hold onto the sins of others. We must not forget that *deliberately* holding onto hurts, builds a deliberate wall between us and God. Surely, we do not want to do this. Or might we be holding onto some burden that we need to get rid of? For example, a loss that happened many years ago, some sin or wrong thing that we did years ago and that we still feel guilty about, some way that we let another down.

Suggestion #8: Come to Daily Mass or to Mass once or twice a week.

Suggestion #9: Restore Balance to your life.

The wholesome life seeks to keep a balance between the various dimensions of our lives:

- God and church
- Family relationships
- Work/projects (if retired)
- Body care
- Mental and emotional well being
- Recreation and social relationships.

There are 168 hours in the week. Is there some area(s) in our lives that is getting short changed? If so, what area and what can we do to restore some balance to our lives.

Suggestion #10: End the Day with an Examination of Conscience

St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, used to tell his young recruits who had several spiritual exercises to do daily: "If you can only do one spiritual exercise each day, let it be the examination of conscience." Steps:

- Take a moment to ask the Holy Spirit to reflect back over the day and help you to see it with his eyes.
- Recount the moments or times when you acted in a Christ like way. For these times give thanks.
- Recount the times when your thoughts, words or actions were not Christ like. For these times, *ask the Lord's mercy.*
- For the hours ahead or for the next day, ask the Holy Spirit to help you to be more faithful to your baptismal call to love God and others.