

Forty Lenten Ideas

Janet Schaeffler, OP

As Lent approaches each year, our minds turn to, “what will we do; what will we give up?” Instead of giving up, why not put something in ... something that will take hold and stay with us for the rest of our lives – since Lent is about change/conversion. Remember that real penance is to live life well: to be the mercy and peace of God toward others.

Perhaps one or two of these ideas will be helpful:

1. **As you read/hear the Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent**, and reflect on the Spirit driving Jesus to the desert, what is the Spirit driving you, dragging you, to do this Lent? Lent is about God calling us, not us deciding ... but what God wants of us.
2. **Give something away every day** (or once a week if every day is too challenging). It could be money, but it doesn't have to be. A smile, a compliment or a helping hand, sometimes, is more appreciated, more necessary, and harder to give.
3. **Forgive a long-held grudge.** Forgiving someone else will bless you as much – if not more – than the person you forgive.

4. **Become a more knowledgeable Catholic.** Many Catholics wish they knew more about their faith. Do something about that. Search out adult faith formation opportunities at your parish, in your vicariate. Suggest to your parish/vicariate what would be helpful. Start a home discussion group; your parish will help you get started. Listen to tapes, read your parish bulletin or a good book; subscribe to Catholic magazines.
5. **Pray for strangers.** In addition to praying for your family/friends, cultivate the habit of praying for people in line at the grocery store, for mourners in a funeral procession, for ambulance passengers, for people in the news, for those beyond our borders, etc.
6. **Complaining Fast.** Try to refrain from all whining and complaining. See if this doesn't help you become more aware of all the good things in your life.
7. **Thank people who deserve it.** Cultivate the habit of looking for opportunities to thank others: maintenance people who clean your workplace, garbage collectors who take away the trash, the mechanic who fixes your car; the numerous clerks in the stores. There are people running our city governments; there are dedicated parish staffs finding creative and compassionate ways to minister and meet today's needs. In person or in writing, thank someone every day this Lent.

8. **Buy an extra** – to give away. The next time you get a cup of coffee on a crisp morning or a newspaper, buy an extra to give to someone.
9. **Meet a neighbor.** If you don't know your neighbors (or haven't talked to them for a long time), take them a plate of cookies.
10. **The Present Moment.** Remind yourself of God's presence with you, by taking a few moments several times a day, to repeat:
 - God is near, God is here.
 - God is supporting me at each and every moment of my life.
11. **Send an anonymous gift** to someone you know who needs a pick-me-up.
12. **Write a letter** to the editor about a peace and justice issue.
13. **Read and reflect on the Scripture readings** the night before you participate in the weekend liturgy.
14. **If you were told that you would die next week**, whom would you most like to seek forgiveness from? Write a letter, an e-mail, or phone and ask pardon for the distance between you – even if it is his or her fault.
15. **Choose one of the Gospels.** Read through it, writing down all of the questions that Jesus asks. Which of these questions is Jesus

particularly asking you at this time in your life? How are you answering?

16. **Enthusiasm means “one with the energy of God.”** Who in your life can you count on to reflect back to you this essential spiritual quality? Have you thanked them lately?

17. **Make Someone’s Day.** Visit <http://daymakermovement.com>

18. **Volunteer your time** with the aged, widowed, homebound.

19. **Enjoy yourself in a way that costs nothing.** Thomas Merton once remarked that we should enjoy watching the rain fall before someone figures out a way to charge us for it. What can you – and your family/friends do to enjoy each other and life – that requires no money?

20. **Reflect on the daily Scripture readings.** These websites might be helpful:

- www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/dailty.html
- www.rc.net/wcc/readings/index.html
- www.daily-word-of-life.com
- www.goodnews.ie

21. **Learn more about the Catholic social teachings of our Church.**

These websites would be helpful:

- www.educationforjustice.org

- www.osjspm.org
- www.richmonddiocese.org/ojp
- www.justpeace.org
- www.shc.edu/theolibrary
- www.paxjoliet.org/justeach

- 22. Consider who might be the last person you would leave any materials or resources to if you were to die today.** Then spend at least ten minutes in prayer for that person.
- 23. Pass it on.** Recall one person, now deceased, who was instrumental in your early formation. Choose one specific way you can pass on to another the gift that person gave to you.
- 24. Realize the wonderfulness of living.** Emily in *Our Town* says, “Oh Earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it – every, every minute?” At the end of each day, write down in your journal the wonder of the ordinary in your day. Thank God.
- 25. Send a complimentary letter** to a legislator or government employee.
- 26. Volunteer** at a nursing home, soup kitchen, hospital, or with a hospice organization.

27. Responsorial Psalms. Often we pay attention to the three Scripture readings at Sunday liturgy, but give little notice to the Psalm Response which we sing. Listen to them with more interest during this Lent. Is there one which particularly strikes you? Perhaps the refrain might become your mantra or prayer for the Lenten or Easter season.

28. Rejoice in the good fortune of someone else. Express your happiness in a note or with a call.

29. Give your place in the supermarket line to a mother with restless little kids.

30. Make a List of When It all Worked out Well. Think of when you worried, when things looked disastrous. But make a list of when things worked out well. Give thanks to God.

31. Reflect or journal on these questions: What do I find in my life today that I can love

- about my spouse
- about my children
- about my friends
- about my job
- about my God
- about my church
- about myself

about my life

- 32. Do one specific thing** to help create a Christian environment at your job or place of business.
- 33. Consider your vocabulary.** Decide to remove at least one disparaging term or impolite word each week during Lent. Place a compassionate, graceful or at least neutral word on your tongue when you are tempted to use the term you are removing.
- 34. Take up the serious study** of one timely issue such as poverty, world hunger, violence, etc.
- 35. Enjoy life.** Ecclesiastes 8:15 says, "So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink and enjoy themselves." Rev. Thomas Keating, O.C.S. O. in *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (Paulist Press, 1999), says, "Every human pleasure is meant to be a stepping stone to knowing God better or to discovering some new aspect of God." Slow down and take time to enjoy life today.
- 36. Become involved** in a parish activity that ministers to others.
- 37. Incorporate moments of silence into your daily routine** – moments of silence for prayer: a silent moment at your desk before beginning work, while sitting at a park bench during lunch, in your car before starting the drive home, after the evening news.

- 38. Find out what you can do to support** the work of community organizations that are providing food, shelter, and legal and financial assistance to homeless people, immigrants, and refugees. Don't overlook the groups that are responding to international crises.
- 39. Volunteer an hour of your time,** or contribute an hour's salary, to a group or organization that is seeking to make peace in the local community or in the world.
- 40. Send Easter cards** to people with whom you usually do not correspond – especially the lonely, widowed, homebound, and grieving.