

## Lenten Practices: Calls to Growth and Conversion

Janet Schaeffler, OP

Baptism calls us to be new creatures – all the time, not just at the moment of our Baptism. We continue to grow, to be more and more the persons God created us to be. Each year Lent calls us deeply to that (each evening we reflect on how we're doing), but each Lent, as a community, we do it together. In prayer (of all kinds), fasting (of all kinds), and almsgiving (of all kinds), we become fully the new creatures that baptism marks us.

Here are 40 suggestions for Lenten practices (which, hopefully, will then continue in our daily lives).

1. Learn a prayer method that you have not previously used (*Lectio Divina*, Centering Prayer, Liturgy of the Hours, etc.)
  - [www.goodnews.ie/lectio.shtml](http://www.goodnews.ie/lectio.shtml)
  - [www.contemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org)
  - [www.liturgyhours.org](http://www.liturgyhours.org)
2. Begin a bank in which you will donate money to be shared with those in need. Ideas will be given throughout these forty suggestions. First: Read Isaiah 58: 5-6. What injustice, what oppression do you see around you? How is “untying the thongs of the yoke” of oppression a form of fasting? Give a dime for every injustice you witness, hear or read about today. What role will you play in one of these situations?
3. Write an affirming letter to your newspaper or television station for some good programming or value-based coverage they have done. (Pope John XXIII said: “Look at the good there is, and try to encourage it as much as possible. That itself will lessen the bad.”)
4. Pray that the best will happen to the public person you dislike the most.
5. Once a week go on a prayer walk with your family, your spouse or a friend. As you walk, pray for the people you come in contact with, the people behind the doors of the homes, the hospitals, the businesses. Pay attention to the things that make your neighborhood unique. Where are people caring for each other?

- Because we are often in cars, this time of walking may slow us down and help us to notice and pray for people and things we don't usually notice.
6. Compliment the person who you think needs it the least.
  7. Start your day by reflecting on the day's Scripture readings. For help:
    - The U.S. bishops' website <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings>
    - [www.dailygospel.org](http://www.dailygospel.org) will email you the Gospel reading each morning
    - [www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/daily.html](http://www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/daily.html)
    - [www.goodnews.ie](http://www.goodnews.ie)
    - [www.daily-word-of-life.com](http://www.daily-word-of-life.com)
  8. The desert is a place where we are stripped of distractions. Give a dime for every TV program that you watch for the next three days. Give a penny for every commercial that you see.
  9. Try to go for a week without mentioning the weather; find other topics of conversation, especially those which will show that you are interested in your conversation partner as a person.
  10. Pick a day a week (or every two weeks) to fast from TV (or from a program that you think you can't do without. In today's culture, television has become our story-teller, rather than family members (or our Scripture). Spend time with these story-tellers.
  11. Look for the good. Take time to see the good in your life: family, friends, neighbors, co-workers. Find one good thing each day of Lent. Tell that person one way he/she shows you the goodness of God.
  12. Fast from self-criticism. Sometimes the worst enemy of our own spiritual growth is the harsh way we speak to ourselves. Spend time this Lent realizing that you are a beloved child of God. Speak kindly to yourself.
  13. Check some of the websites that encourage a simplicity of lifestyle:
    - Affluenza: [www.affluenza.org](http://www.affluenza.org)
    - Alternatives for Simple Living: [www.simpleliving.org](http://www.simpleliving.org)
    - 50 Ways to Challenge Over-Commercialism:  
<http://www.earthhealing.info/fifty.htm>
    - New American Dream: <http://www.newdream.org>
    - Simple Living: <http://home.nwciowa.edu/andres/simpleliving.htm>
  14. Give a dime for each unused appliance, toy and article of clothing in your home. Why do we sometimes buy things we don't really need?
  15. Two meals per day. Most of the world survives on two meals per day or less. Fasting by eating less attempts to balance what we really need and what is excess.

16. Eat with family. Make family meals a priority during this Lent. More than sharing food happens during meals. Meaning, difficulties, and joys are shared. Bonds are created and relationships are strengthened. Fast from fast food and eating on the run.
17. The father of the prodigal son planned a joyous feast when his younger son returned home. How do you give thanks for the children in your extended family? Pray for the well-being of all children of the world. Give a quarter for every child you see today.
18. Connect with our larger family. Learn about the saints; today we have a number of books and websites that help us become acquainted with those who have gone before us:
  - *Saints for Every Occasion: 101 of Heaven's Most Powerful Patrons* by Thomas J. Craughwell (Stampley Enterprises, 2001)
  - *My Life with the Saints* by James Martin, SJ (Loyola Press, 2006)
  - *Blessed Among All Women: Women Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for our Time* by Robert Ellsberg (Crossroad Publishing, 2007)
  - *Lives of the Saints: From Mary and St. Francis of Assisi to John XXIII and Mother Teresa* by Richard P. McBrien (HarperOne, 2006)
  - [www.AmericanCatholic.org/Features/SaintofDay](http://www.AmericanCatholic.org/Features/SaintofDay)
19. Reach out: who needs you? Phone a lonely person to share a friendly “hello” and to listen for a few minutes; volunteer to cook for senior citizens or someone who is grieving; deliver Meals on Wheels; is there someone in your parish who needs a ride to church each weekend?
20. Philo of Alexandria said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” Choose one person a day (or week) to do something (small or large, anonymously or not) to make their day a little brighter.
21. Whenever you sit down at your computer (first thing at work or at the end of the day), try a ten-minute prayer based on the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius at [www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie).
22. Fast from gossip. Avoid listening to gossip and refuse to pass it on.
23. “Look up at the sky, and count the stars, if you can.” (Genesis 15:5) Give a nickel for each star you can count tonight.
24. Thank God. Each night before going to bed, write down at least four things for which you are grateful. Being grateful is the basis of all we are as a Eucharistic people.

25. Brother David Steindl-Rast quoted in *I Will Not Die an Unlived Life* (by Dawna Markova) says, “The antidote to exhaustion may not be rest. It may be wholeheartedness. You are so exhausted because of all the things you are doing are just busyness.” What two things could you stop during this Lent that “are just busyness?”
26. Prayer for peace pervades our prayer all year long; during Lent it can spread throughout all our resolutions and practices. Three prayer resources from the USCCB (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops) are: A Rosary for Peace, A Scriptural Rosary for Justice and Peace, and a Prayer for Peace. These are available at 1-800-235-8722 or [www.usccbpublishing.org](http://www.usccbpublishing.org).
27. Is there some unnecessary work you can give up in order to have more time for people?
28. In his book, *Praying By Hand* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), Fr. Basil Pennington suggests five decades of the rosary to reflect contemporary social justice concerns: Jesus Feeds the Hungry; Jesus Heals the Sick; Jesus Respects Women; Jesus Reaches Out and Touches Outcasts; and Jesus Honors the Despised. As we pray the Joyful, Sorrowful, Luminous and Glorious Mysteries, use these mysteries to meditate and pray the rosary, reflecting on social justice concerns for our world today.
29. Study the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, and let your voice be heard:
- Write letters to advocate for programs to address hunger issues through Bread for the World ([www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org)).
  - Write letters to advocate for human rights through Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org) or [www.amnestyusa.org](http://www.amnestyusa.org)). Amnesty International works for human rights, especially in campaigns to end the death penalty, to abolish torture, to stop violence against women, to protect the right to food, and to stop weapons proliferation.
  - Write letters to television executives (and sponsors of television programs) asking that they seriously look at the violence that is promoted on television programming today.
30. Prayer Book. Purchase a book with blank pages or make one with a page for each day of Lent. Journal in your book each day. Copy something you want to remember, write your own prayers, draw your thoughts, etc.
31. Write letters. Notice advertising that exploits poor people. Write to the company/business expressing your awareness and disapproval.
32. This year we are hearing proclaimed the Gospel of Mark at liturgy. During your quiet prayer time during Lent read the entire Gospel of Mark, jotting down all the questions which Jesus asks. Which question(s) speak to you right now? Which one(s) do you think Jesus is asking you?

33. If you always participate in liturgy at the same time each weekend (Saturday evening, 8:30 am or 12 noon), you might try participating in a different one a few times during Lent. You might meet some new friends in your parish, get the feeling of your parish liturgies at another “time slot.” You might even visit another parish in your vicariate or another part of the archdiocese.
34. Or – you might just sit in a different place in church (if you usually sit in the same place). This would apply to parish social events and meetings, also, since human nature usually calls us to sit in the same place, with the usual people that we know. We are all one, part of God’s family, part of this parish family. Sit some place new and meet new people, deepening our bonds of belonging.
35. What might your life be like without water? Give a dime each time you use water today. Pray for those who do not have adequate water.
36. As part of your Lenten almsgiving, make a decision to learn as much as possible about one social issue (immigration, human trafficking, racism, AIDS victims, child poverty, homelessness, etc.). Donate to an organization, related to your chosen issue that supports the dignity of the human person.
37. Log on to some of these websites for information and practical suggestions for action to care for God’s creation:
- Carbon Footprint: [www.carbonfootprint.com](http://www.carbonfootprint.com)
  - Friends of the Earth: [www.foe.org](http://www.foe.org)
  - Global Stewards: [www.globalstewards.org](http://www.globalstewards.org)
  - The Green Guide: [www.thegreenguide.com](http://www.thegreenguide.com)
  - Worldwatch Institute: [www.worldwatch.org](http://www.worldwatch.org)
38. “The Master needs it.” (Mark 11:3) That was the answer the two disciples gave to the owner of the colt. What does God need from you? Reflect on three different times you have heard God say, “I need you.” Give a quarter for each time you responded to the call. (Donate the money to the organization of your choice.)
39. Mahatma Gandhi said: “To the millions who have to go without two meals a day, the only acceptable form in which God dare appear is food.” During Lent, have a simple meal once a week and give the money saved to a local soup kitchen, your parish food pantry, or Bread for the World ([www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org)).
40. For one week, count your blessings.
- First day: a blessing from a family member
  - Second day: from a neighbor
  - Third day: from a friend
  - Fourth day: from a work colleague
  - Fifth day: from a stranger
  - Sixth day: from a child
  - Seventh day: from an “enemy”

