

Lent – A Time to Grow and Reach Out

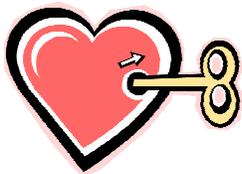
Consider the following strategies for outreach and new vitality for the parish this Lent:

Ash Wednesday - Welcome the Spiritual Seekers

On Ash Wednesday there are many new faces coming to receive ashes. Ash Wednesday presents a significant opportunity to welcome and respond to spiritual seekers. Some desire help to connect with God and change their lives. These are spiritually hungry people, many of whom are not parishioners or affiliated with another church. These seekers find meaning in the Catholic spiritual tradition of ashes. Take advantage of this opportunity to extend a special sign of welcome to those who are feeling distant from God or the Church? One easy way to do this is by leaving welcome cards in the pews on Ash Wednesday. Why a welcome card on Ash Wednesday?

First, because Easter and Christmas are already too hectic for most pastors and parish leaders. Second, because Ash Wednesday is probably the next highest visitor-traffic day for many parishes. What to include in the card? Include four things: a word of special welcome, a schedule of Lent enrichment opportunities and devotions at the parish, contact information to any visitor who desires to learn more about the Catholic Church, a tear off for guests who want to receive more information by mail or by phone (include space for name, phone or email, and check off what the guest would like to receive - reconciliation, a call, information on becoming Catholic.

View Announcement: “We are delighted to have guests with us today. We invite all visitors to take a welcome card from the pew. (Hold it up and describe it briefly.) Take the card home and consider joining us for another event this Lent. If you would like to be contacted, just fill out the bottom of the card indicating what assistance we can provide (receive a call from a member of the pastoral staff or the parish welcome team, receive materials on the Catholic faith) and leave it at the end of the pew on the way out. We would love to hear from you and be of service this Lent.”



Card Design: Include a small image of the parish and a graphic of a key and heart to suggest the open door of parish and the invitation that Lent presents for all of us to open our hearts to God.

Remember: Prepare the greeters, the parish secretary and staff about the importance of responding to any requests promptly and with compassion. And assign someone to keep track

of the cards that are received, what response was made to each one and what if any follow-up is recommended.

Grow in Discipleship – Day by Day

Lent is about more than giving up a pleasant addiction (e.g. mine is chocolate). Lent is a time for growing in discipleship. Why not invite parishioners to take a day by day approach to growing in discipleship (www.USCCB.org/Lent) or Busted Halo (www.BustedHalo.com) which offers a seeker-friendly, daily activity calendar with everyday acts of discipleship for each day for Lent. Why not spread the word about it this Lent or make up your own.

Create Your Own Parish Lenten Prayer Guide

Many Catholics purchase a prayer guide each Lent for \$10-\$15 (sight unseen) in hopes that it will inspire them. These booklets typically include the reading of the day along with a thought or a question for reflection. At best this serves as a private prayer aid. Some are disappointed with the relevance of a writer whose experience seems far from that of the reader. Why not encourage some sharing in your community with a new approach to daily Lenten prayer by tapping the talents and holiness of your own good people in creating the booklet? Your parish can invite forty parishioners to examine the readings for each of the 40 days of Lent in advance and ask them to write a short reflection with a question or challenge for prayerful consideration. The parish would then collect these reflections into a booklet using a simple desktop publisher and distribute them on Ash Wednesday and the First Sunday of Lent.

This booklet is an especially popular and relevant resource because it is written by fellow parishioners. In some parishes that have used this booklet, the contributors sometimes included an email address or phone number in case the reader wanted to discuss a particular reflection further. Parishes have typically listed a schedule of Lenten events and programs on the back cover which was a helpful reminder to parishioners. And since our churches are also visited on Ash Wednesday by non-parishioners, this prayer guide can be made available to visitors and serve as an outreach tool with a message of welcome on the inside cover and an invitation to attend the schedule of Lenten events on the back cover. Some parishes have posted the reflections at the parish website or Facebook page for people to access on lunch hour while at work or when and wherever they are so inclined.

The invitation letter to potential contributors might read as follows:

Dear...

We want to offer our parishioners something special this Lent. We want to offer a free booklet for prayer and spiritual growth. This will be a special opportunity for the parish because it will be created by the people who live and worship alongside of us each week. Each contributor will share a thought or question from their own reflection on the readings of each day in Lent. I am writing to ask you to be one of our contributors this Lent. You were chosen because you consider by many to be a person of prayer and genuine faith.

Please review the enclosed directions along with a sample and the readings that we chose for you and then give this your prayerful consideration. Call me if you have any questions at [my phone number]. I will contact you to discuss your willingness to help in the next week. Submissions can be emailed back to me [your email] or sent by US mail using the enclosed form. Please send in your submission by (date) three weeks before Ash Wednesday). This will allow us sufficient time for printing and distribution.

If you agree, you also have the option of listing your name and preferred contact information after your reflection. This would allow an interested parishioner to chat with you about your comments. In other parishes where this has been done, parishioners have had very positive evaluations, and especially enjoyed the depth of personal sharing and conversations that this booklet invited within the parish. Do not hesitate to call me about this exciting Lenten opportunity for our parish.

In Christ,

Pastor or Project Leader

A complete template for the Lenten Booklet is available from the Office of Parish Life. Call 847-5531.

Take the Poverty Challenge

Instead of repeating a symbolic gesture (e.g. giving up chocolate) this Lent, why not live and work in solidarity with those who enter this Lent in poverty. You can do this by taking the Poverty Challenge. In this challenge you may come to an unusual conversion through the challenges that face the poor. Consider accepting one challenge for each week of the five weeks of Lent. This can be very powerful when the pastor and staff take a lead in this commitment. And taking the poverty challenge will provide a good source of illustrations for the homilist.

Week 1. Be Conscious of the Purchases You Make Each Day - For the first week of Lent starting on Sunday, simply record all purchases in a journal each day. Leave nothing out. Make it fun by starting with a guess about how much you will spend. Why do this? Reason #1: To know what it means to live as someone who has to keep close track of every dollar. Some folks have to be

careful to avoid coming up short of money at the end of the week or end of the month. For those living in poverty, running out of cash can be disastrous. More and more people know what it means to be forced into debts that carry exorbitant fees and interest rates to obtain the essentials of life. Reason #2: Studies have proven that you will spend less by the end of Lent (which gives you a chance to devote some money to help those in need). Take this first step on the first Sunday of Lent.

Week 2. Avoid Borrowing for Any Reason from Anyone - Spend the week in solidarity with those who have no one from whom they can borrow money. The poor learn the hard way that borrowing is a luxury that they simply cannot afford. Many who live in poverty are just one or two unanticipated expenses from being homeless, once they start borrowing. For those who want to go further refrain from using credit cards as these represent just one form of borrowing that the privileged take for granted. Take the second step in a journey of solidarity by not borrowing any money for any reason this week.

Week 3. Give Up Something - Pick something that you presume to need (e.g. use of a credit card, computer or television at night). Journal about what happens to your mood and attitude toward others if you lose access to something that you take for granted. This might be a cell phone, a breakfast food, or an mp3 player. Many of us take texting, favorite drinks, and transportation with a car for granted. People who are poor cannot jump in a car, communicate with friends at a moment's notice or grab a soothing beverage on the way home. How does this affect our ability to empathize with people who cannot afford such "luxuries".

Week 4. Reflect on Your Experience - Look back to your guess on how much you spent in the first week and compare it to what you have recorded. At this rate of spending, how many days would you be able to manage if you only had a minimum wage job. Review what you have given up and how it affected you.

Week 5. Reflect or Talk to Others about Your Experience - Take time to journal or discuss all that has happened to you so far this Lent. How has it affected what you hear in the Gospel? Discuss it with others that you trust. How has this challenge changed your view of those who face the challenge of poverty?

For more outreach and spiritual growth ideas contact the Office of Parish Life, 716-847-5531.

- Dennis Mahaney, Office of Parish Life