

A Printer Friendly Version of "Choosing Lent - Acting Lent"

<http://www.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/Lent/choosinglent.html>

CHOOSING LENT - ACTING LENT

The reason that choosing and acting Lent is so important is that we are body-persons. We experience things with our senses, relish them with our imaginations and we share in God's own creative and loving activity when our hearts and hands work together for and with others.

These ideas represent a variety of choices and acts that have come to our minds as we reflect upon our Lenten journey. There are countless others that will fit our experience as we continue to reflect on the question: What might I do to grow in my appreciation of your love and my desire to share it with others?

Here are a few ways to choose and act Lent. More will be added soon.

Symbols in Our Home
Our Service for and with the Poor
Spring Cleaning for Freedom
Family Conversion – Relationship Conversion
Realigning our Priorities
Family Prayer
The Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy

SYMBOLS IN OUR HOME

We need to choose to let our homes be a place full of the holy – things that help raise our minds and hearts to God. Our world is full of so many images that lure our minds and hearts elsewhere. Here are some symbols that will carry the ongoing meaning we give them, for us and for our families and loved ones.

A Crucifix

We probably all have a crucifix in our home. If not, Lent might be a wonderful time to buy one and place it in a central place. Even a child's drawing of Jesus' death for us can be a powerful, stirring reminder of God's love.

Water

A simple bowl of water, in a central place, can be transformed into an ongoing reminder of our journey to the font of baptism for the renewal of commitment and life in Christ. Perhaps we can pray over it. "Lord, may this water remind us of our baptism and be a blessing for our home, where our dying and rising in you is lived each day. Bless us, as we sign ourselves with it each day."

Sand

Perhaps a bowl of sand can help us remember our journey. God led the people in their journey in the desert. Jesus himself reenacted that journey to face his own temptations. The

desert can be a place of retreat, where there is a freedom from distractions. It can be a good place to be led and to face our temptations.

A Candle

Imagine having a candle in a central place in our home. Imagine praying over it together as we begin Lent. "Lord thank you for the gift of your Light in the midst of all darkness. Let this candle be a symbol of our faith in your presence among us." And imagine if we light this candle whenever we feel tempted away from the Light of Jesus, when we are experiencing tensions in our home, whenever we need special graces. Imagine how powerful experiencing the lighting of the New Fire will be at the Easter Vigil.

Perhaps we have Baptismal candles that were given to us or our children at Baptism. It might be very meaningful to bring them out and lay them near our central candle. We can remember the words that were spoken when we received this candle: "Receive the Light of Christ. ... Keep this flame burning brightly."

Perhaps we have the white baptismal garments that have been used in our family for baptism. These could be taken out. We can remember the words, "See in the white garments you wear, the outward sign of your Christian dignity. Bring this garment unstained to the joys of everlasting life." We can let it remind us of our white garment, when we see the newly baptized come out of the font of baptism, and be given their new white garments. It is a symbol of the priesthood in Jesus that we all share.

A Bible

The Word is so important for us during Lent. Perhaps the prominent presence of a Bible in our home can represent for us our desire for God's Word in our lives. Imagine the experience that could be ours if - when we feel a new inspiration or a softening of our heart, or just a sense of God's love - we pick up that Bible and simply, reverently kiss it.

Are there other symbols which make our particular journey full of meaning and faith?

OUR SERVICE FOR AND WITH THE POOR

This doesn't need to feel out of our reach. In so many reflective ways, we can make choices to act in solidarity with those for whom we desire to have a special care, and from whom we know we will learn much about faith and trust in God.

Soup kitchen - food pantry

So many people depend upon our charity, in societies that can't yet provide for an equal distribution of our resources, and offer means for a growth in dignity and justice in attaining them. Imagine if we take some time to research how the poorest of the poor are cared for in our area. We may want to practice our generosity in preparing food, serving it ourselves or sharing what we have with food pantries that offer daily survival for those in need. Imagine if we felt inspired to go deeper. What graces might come to us if we were to go to a meal program and sit with and visit the poor? What fear would we need to overcome? What might we learn if we ask how they are getting along? Or ask them about their faith? Perhaps we

might grow in courage to bring our children or friends. How might we return to our lives with greater freedom and trust?

What else might we do, that fits with our circumstances and the needs around me and in the world?

SPRING CLEANING FOR FREEDOM

So many of us have accumulated much more than we need. It bursts from our closets, overflows our shelves and clutters our lives. Lent might be a wonderful time to deliberately release ourselves from the many "things" we own by cleaning out our closets and simplifying our lives in a prayerful and intentional way.

On one level, this is ridding ourselves of things we don't need, or things that we hated to part with except that they are so "out of style." Certainly, many of us have many things that are "extra" or "unneeded" for us, but could be wonderful for those who can't afford to buy clothes at a store.

Another level of this journey into personal freedom is to ask ourselves how much I really do need. How many sweaters do I want to choose to have? How many jackets, sport shirts, dresses, shoes? How much jewelry? How much sporting equipment? How much electronic equipment? How many sets of silverware or dishes? How much of so many things we have in our lives? We can get as serious and go as deeply into this as we desire to find fruit. This would not be the question above: should I get rid of what I don't need? This takes us into giving up good stuff, perhaps stuff I'm attached to, because I want to experience the exercise of freedom. I do this because I sense that I'm not free in some areas that are tremendously important for me, important for my salvation, and growing in freedom before the things of my life can be a great grace. This freedom, too, will place us in greater solidarity with those who find such great happiness and joy in trusting in God, while having so much less than we imagine we could survive on.

What else might I do, that fits with my circumstances and the needs around me and in the world?

FAMILY CONVERSION - RELATIONSHIP CONVERSION

Lent can be a good time to reflect on the people who mean the most to us and the relationships we hold most dear. For those of us who live in industrialized countries, it can be jarring to realize that our time together as a family might amount to no more than a few minutes a day. Our lives are independent as we scatter in different directions each day for work, school or childcare.

This season of reflection and renewal might be an appropriate time to pray about our family lives and how we can be more thoughtful and prayerful about Lent as a family.

Perhaps we could hold a family meeting over dinner or some other relaxed place. We could discuss Lent and the symbols of the season using the resources here. We might want to talk about how our faith life is not a journey we make alone, but one we are in as a community, as a family.

One Lenten family practice might include a daily act of love for our family. Can we look around and see some small thing that needs to be done to make our lives together better? Is there laundry to sort or dishes to be washed? Is there a floor that needs sweeping or a room that needs dusting? Just one effort by each of us each day can make a dramatic difference in sharing the workload in the family. The grace we are reaching for goes beyond getting the garbage taken out, for example. We know it is a grace when my experience of taking the garbage out, feels to me like an act of love, an act of solidarity as a family. Perhaps the simplest way to prepare for this grace is to pray:

Dear Lord, may this simple, ordinary sacrifice of my time for the sake of those I love, draw us closer together as a family whose hearts you are drawing to yourself in the togetherness of our family love.

One of the real graces of Lent has to do with forgiveness and reconciliation – mercy and healing. This is never simply a matter between Jesus and me. It always has something to do with my family and with my relationships – how we are with each other. What in us needs mercy and healing? What patterns that we have need our reflections and common family choices and actions this Lent?

REALIGNING OUR PRIORITIES

All of us have, at one time or another, named certain things as our "priorities." From time to time, when we become aware of our not doing something that is really important, we say, "I have to make that a priority." Lent is an important time to do a top-to-bottom review of what we value and what we actually do, in our every day lives. Whenever we do this, we always discover that something needs re-aligning. We discover that there are values we hold, commitments we've made, growth we desire, that simply don't make it on the list of our "actual priorities" - that is, the things that take the "first place" in our lives. For example, I might say, "My family is my firstpriority!" My family might say otherwise. I might say, "My faith is among my top priorities." But, an honest self-examination may show otherwise. I may say, I hear the words of Jesus that we will be judged really on only one thing: how we care for "the least" of his sister and brothers. I may only occasionally even notice that feeding, clothing, caring for or defending the marginal never makes it to my priority list.

A thorough review of what is most important to us, and what seems to be important to us by virtue of what we actually do, is prime Lenten activity. If what we are hoping to do during Lent is to grow in personal freedom, based upon our growing sense of God's love for us, and our clearer vision of who we are, and our deepening desire to be more closely aligned with the heart of Jesus, then we will want to do this personal review very carefully. How else might we ever hope to get to a heroic, courageous, self-sacrificing following of others? What chance will care of the poor ever have of making it into our priorities? How will we ever be able to break old self-defeating habits and secure the establishment of new ones that help us be who we want to actually be?

Getting Started

I can start a variety of ways, but it would be wonderful if we could start with prayer. We can ask God - in our own words, and with desire - for the grace to do this review with real honesty, and with a real desire to grow in freedom and integrity.

Who am I? What is my purpose?

Then, I might want to spend a few days reflecting upon - in the background all day long - who I am, and what my purpose is. Then, I might spend a few more days reflecting upon who I say Jesus is, and what this means for me. It doesn't make sense to start with a review of what I really value, if I haven't first examined if my values "fit" the truth of who I am and who I am called to be.

Naming my values

Then, I can name what is most important to me. A piece of paper would be very helpful, so that I can put it into words and keep "editing" or refining the words as I go along. I will try to be as explicit as possible. Instead of saying, "My kids." I might spell out the values that are important to me in my saying that my kids are a value, e.g., "It is extremely important to me that I be there for and with my kids when they are encountering key growth moments in their lives, in so many areas - homework time, for reflection time, in relationship struggles, in wins and losses, in relaxing and having fun." We want to "open up" our values, as we name them. What does it mean to say I value "my faith" or "my relationship with God" or "service to others"?

Spelling out the values in actions

Then, with each value, I will list what that value will mean in concrete behavior. For example, I may have written a value statement that is quite wonderful, "My relationship with my wife is the most important relationship of my life: I need her for my faith, and for my everyday strength; I want to be there for her, supporting her faith, affirming her, and caring for her in all her needs; I want to spend the rest of my life growing together in service of others." That would be an incredibly important set of things to say about what my wife means to me. The real work, the real "choosing" happens when I spell that out in real actions that will give life to that valuing. The true test of a value's importance to me is how it survives, in competition with other important values, in the contest for time in my everyday life. I can tell what I really value, by what I really do. When I feel like I'm not doing what I really value, then I need to realign my priorities.

Don't forget to be complete

One of the serious "mistakes" in trying to realign priorities is that I can easily overlook "operational priorities" that I might not be to aware of, or that I might not be to proud of. If I'm going to "re-arrange" what is important to me - moving some things higher up on the list and others things lower down - then I need a complete list. There probably are things in my life that I just do regularly - I read the paper every morning at 6 a.m.; we go out to dinner every Saturday night; I have "season tickets" to something. I need to name these. If "watching TV" is a big priority in my life (something I spend 4, 6, 10, 20 or more hours a week doing), or if I have to watch something every week, I should name it. If escaping into sexual fantasy is something I do quite regularly, I should name it. Smoking, drinking, surfing the net, collecting little ceramic things, fixing up the basement, are things that can become pretty engaging, are often time and resource consuming, and should be named.

Establishing new priorities

When all of my priorities are lined up like this, I am then ready to re-value them. We don't want to rush this part of the process. Perhaps we will want to discuss this review with some of the people who are intimately involved with the choices I will be making. And I will want to assess if I have the freedom and grace I need to make the decisions I want to make and to begin to establish new patters. That is precisely when it is important to turn to God with my fresh desires (trusting that they have been inspired by God's initiative already) and ask what I

need.

The next step is to name what my "first priorities" are. This may sound ironic: how many "first" priorities can I have? In this sense, my first priorities are those that I will always do. In any competition for time, these choices will win out. That is what defines them as my priorities. My relationship with God, with my family, with my faith community, with my friends, with others in need, might be in this category. This is what I do not want to neglect any more.

Then, it is very important to name the second level of priorities. These are very important, and I don't want to neglect them either, but I want to make sure to distinguish them from my top priorities. I may, for example, have "my work" priorities here. They are very important to me, but I want to realign my priorities so that my first ones actually come first.

Then, I will clearly put a lot of other stuff in the third level of priorities. Now this process gets to be purifying. I may discover that I spend more money on smoking or recreation or knickknacks than I give in support of my faith community or the poor. I may realize that I spend more time watching TV than I do praying. I may find it difficult to surrender something I "always do" for something I now want to make sure I always do. Since this is where we may need the most grace, this is a very important time to turn to the Lord and ask for help and freedom. Dying to self, in order to be who I am called to be for and with others, is not easy at first. With practice, it can become a source of great joy and fulfillment. And, with God's grace, it will be part of my contribution to the Reign of God's coming closer and closer.

Building in a review time

Because this realignment will take practice, it will involve some back sliding at times. In times of crisis or under pressure, we all regress back to behaviors we were most comfortable with. Our new priorities can vanish. That is why it is critical to keep reviewing how we are doing. During this Lenten time, we may build in a daily examination of how we are doing. With time, we may want to develop the practice of reviewing our day to day fidelity to our priorities every Sunday morning, or some other time during the week. With each examination, we need to give thanks to God, for the grace that has inspired and sustained this life-giving realignment of our priorities.

FAMILY PRAYER

One of the real challenges that we too often find in our contemporary, busy lives is finding time to be together as a family. It is especially difficult to find opportunities to pray together. And, if prayer, other than going to church on Sunday, hasn't been a family tradition, it can seem very "unnatural" to introduce it as something we might do together as family. Here are a few possibilities - call them dreams - for ways we might pray as a family, during Lent, or at any time of the year.

Prayer Before Meals

One of the most natural times to pray, is as we sit down to eat. We can begin, or "break the ice," by simply saying, *Let's pray* or *Let's just pause for a minute to give thanks*. One of the challenges of doing this prayer well, is that we don't want our food to get cold. This leads us to do the prayer quickly. Brief prayer doesn't have to be without substance or power. And, it

doesn't always have to be after the food is on the table. For a change of pattern, we could gather everyone to the table for prayer, and then bring the food to the table.

We begin with a prayer of thanksgiving:

*Lord, we thank you for the blessings of this day
and for this time together as family.*

*We thank you for this wonderful meal
and for this hour we can share it.*

We then turn to God and ask for what we need.

*Help us to remember those who have so much
less than we do.*

*Bless us as a family.
Help us to grow in love and care for each other.*

*We ask you to comfort and give strength and
peace
to those who are sick or struggling in any way.*

We can conclude with, *We ask this through
Christ our Lord* or with a traditional table
prayer, which we could say together.

*Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts,
which we are about to receive
from your bounty
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

We always begin with thanksgiving. The "reasons" we give for our gratitude can be very specific, and draw us into this prayer from our "real" place we are in this day. So, we can say that we are grateful *for this Lenten journey, which offers us renewal and prepares us to celebrate Easter with greater freedom.* We might say, *We thank you for being with us each of us today, while we were apart, and for being with us tonight.* Perhaps we will thank God for some special grace that has occurred today. We may want to take time to let each person name one or two things for which he or she is grateful.

This, too, should be very specific to us as a family. We all have family and friends who are sick or in need. Perhaps there is a special challenge or difficulty that one of us is going through. We can turn to God with our concerns about a crisis that is going on in our city or country or some part of the world. With practice, this brief moment will help us be mindful of our desire to turn to God in all our needs. It will help us grow in a sense of compassion and care for so many people. Again, we may want to take time to let each person name one or two prayers of petition.

These options are from the *Book of Common Prayer*.

*Give us grateful hearts, our Father, for all thy mercies,
and make us mindful of the needs of others;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*Bless, O Lord, thy gifts to our use and us to thy service;
for Christ's sake. Amen.*

*Blessed are you, O Lord God, King of the Universe,
for you give us food to sustain our lives and make our
hearts glad;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*For these and all his mercies,
God's holy Name be blessed and praised;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Praying at Other Times

There are many other times or occasions when we can develop the habit of praying together. These examples might inspire our own creative or spontaneous prayer.

In the Morning:

It can be quite transformative of our family bonds, in faith, to pause very briefly to pray together. This might be a spontaneous prayer, while we are laying in bed with our spouse, *Lord, be with us today*, or *Dear, I ask the Lord to give you strength and peace today at your meeting*. Perhaps we are rushing around each other in the kitchen, grabbing breakfast. It can be wonderful to pause to pray, simply asking the Lord to be with each of us in what we are about to do.

In the Car:

So many of us spend a fair amount of time in the car, often with other members of our family. These can be nice times to begin or end the trip, with a very brief prayer. *Bless our shopping tonight. Help us be grateful for the gifts you give us. May this food/these clothes help us be mindful of those who have so much less than we do. Or, Bless Ann at practice today. Give her gratitude and delight in the gifts you give her. Help her to do her best, to encourage others, and to learn what you offer her today. Or, Lord, as we go to Bill and Ann's for dinner, we thank you for our friendship with them, and we ask you to bless this night with all the graces you might offer us in the care we have for one another; we ask this in Jesus' name. Or, Lord, as we drive to church, we thank you for our faith and for this chance to be together with our parish community; please allow us to hear your Word, to give you thanks and praise, and to be nourished for the mission you give us this week.*

Over the Weekend:

Often the weekend offers some special moments together that can be wonderful times of prayer.

Other Times:

We can say brief prayers like this at so many special times. It can be very important to pray together, while cleaning up, in preparation for guests coming for dinner, or an overnight slumber party. We might share the responsibility for "designing" the family prayer for special occasions: Birthdays, Anniversaries, the beginning and ending of a school year, when one of us is beginning any new endeavor. We may want to add some special prayer time if one of us is experiencing a personally anxious time or crisis. For example, if one of us has to wait for an appointment for a biopsy, and then wait for the results, we might place a special candle on our dining room table, and light it each evening as we remember that person in our prayer.

Simple Rituals:

It can be so easy to add gestures that bring powerful prayer to our family life. One of the simplest and most natural is to trace a cross on a loved one's forehead. It can speak volumes to a young child, if his or her parents were to give them this gesture of love and prayer. This ritual can be done everyday, when we part for the day, or at bed time, or it can be reserved for special prayers of blessing before a big event. And, it can be a powerful, faith-filled ritual for a husband and wife, as part of an every day pattern, or at times of great intimacy, to touch

each other in blessing.

Any of the "symbols" that we refer to in our page, "[Symbols in Our Home](#)" can be a source of family ritual. Perhaps we have our own family gesture or ritual that speaks of our faith or draws us into prayer.

Praying for Each Other:

The most important part of family prayer is perhaps the easiest to overlook - how we hold each other up to the Lord. Even when we are not physically together, as a praying family, we want to pray for each other. In reality this means that I have a pattern of talking with the Lord about the people I love most dearly, each and every day. They become part of my very relationship with God. Whether we are a married couple with young children, or I am a single parent, or if my children have grown up and begun lives of their own, this aspect of family prayer is so important. My spouse and I may not share our faith; perhaps my spouse doesn't pray at all; but I can talk with the Lord about my spouse every day - sometimes asking for help, sometimes just expressing my gratitude, sometimes begging for the gift of faith for my spouse.

May our Lord bless our praying, in the community of our family, these days of Lent.

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