

# **Ministry Ideas** for Celebrating Lent and Easter

WITH TEENS, FAMILIES, AND PARISHES

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Saint Mary's Press®



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To Fred, my prayer partner in life.

—Judy Dankert

To Janet—colleague, collaborator, commiserater, friend.

—Marilyn Kielbasa

To my mother, Mary Ann, because she has always been there to encourage me and pray for me. In thanksgiving for all the ways God has blessed my life.

—Marie Sajsa

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## Introduction

Each year, the liturgical seasons of Lent and Easter give us a chance to relive and remember one of the basic mysteries of our Christian faith:

Dying you destroyed our death,  
 rising you restored our life.  
 Lord Jesus, come in glory.

*(Sacramentary, p. 545)*

During this time, the church offers us scriptural readings, rituals, and symbols that speak to us of brokenness and wholeness, darkness and light, sin and repentance, ending and beginning, dying and rising.

The season is—above all—a chance for a profound encounter with the God of transformation. However, it is not the world we seek to transform; it is ourselves. The only way to change the world into a place where God’s Reign is real and recognizable is to change who we are in the world and how we live out our baptismal call to holiness.

Culturally, Lent and Easter are less complicated than Advent and Christmas. The pervasive secularism that overwhelms our attempts to celebrate the sacredness of the liturgical seasons of expectation and Incarnation is not as prevalent in the spring—at least not yet. Nevertheless, an alien visiting from another planet might be quite confused by our various signs and symbols, and come to the erroneous conclusion that Jesus did, in fact, suffer and die on the cross, but was resurrected three days later as a bunny who delivers eggs! We have work to do when it comes to spreading the Good News.

In our age, Lent and Easter are a tough sell. We are used to instant results and quick fixes for the messes in our life. We like to know how things work and how to fix them when they do not. No one likes to focus on the brokenness, the darkness, or the dying—even if these things are the only true way to new life. The thought of taking time to wade through unexplainable spiritual muck that can only lead to deeper mystery is just not appealing to most human beings in the twenty-first century. Given the choice, most of us would take certainty over sanctity, maintenance over mystery.

During Lent and Easter, however, the church challenges us to confront this aversion to spiritual muck. We are called to step back for a time from the busyness of life and embrace both our holiness and humanness as we journey together with a faithful community of believers to meet the Jesus of our history and the Christ of our faith. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen calls it “God’s bargain”:

Sanctity is not giving up the world. It is exchanging the world. It is a continuation of that sublime transaction of the Incarnation in which Christ said to us: You give Me your humanity, I will give you My Divinity. You give Me your time, I will give you My Eternity. You give Me your slavery, I will give you My Freedom. You give Me your death, I will give you My Life.

*(Fulton J. Sheen, Path to Peace: Brief Meditations to Help Catholics in Their Lenten Renewal, p. 3)*

## **LENT, EASTER, AND ADOLESCENTS**

### **Living the Paschal Mystery**

At no time during life does the Paschal mystery seem more real than in the teenage years. The undulating series of dyings and risings that make up a life is complicated by changing bodies, changing relationships, changing hormones, and changing brains. Given their reality, adolescents are uniquely equipped to understand the liturgical rhythms of the season and embrace the message of hope that it brings. To help them do that, however, we must weave our message into the rhythm of their life—a rhythm that is seldom even, frequently syncopated, and often at a tempo that is dangerously close to being out of control.

Consider the realities that are usually part of a teenager's life during the seasons of Lent and Easter—a period that runs from February or early March through most of the rest of the school year. Every situation listed below holds the possibility of triumph or tragedy, the human experience of the Paschal mystery:

- *Valentine's Day.* Valentine's Day is a day to celebrate friendship and romance for the few teens who are happily coupled, but a day of doubt, confusion, and even self-loathing for many others.
- *March Madness and other sports tournaments.* Winter sports are winding down and spring sports are gearing up. The energy required of the participants in these pursuits leaves little time for anything that is not related to school. Wins and losses translate to highs and lows, sometimes to hope and despair.
- *Spring break.* For some it is a time to regroup, relax, and reconnect. For many it is also a time to catch up on homework, projects, and sleep. For others it is a time for vacationing with family.
- *Advanced placement exams, SATs, and state-mandated tests.* Teens who face these types of exams know that their future depends on their scores. Most of them study and take advantage of preparation help offered by their schools or outside agencies.
- *Final decisions regarding post-high school plans.* Graduating seniors who apply to colleges face a possible moment of truth every time they open their mailbox. Those not going to college, face decisions about jobs, living arrangements, and military service.
- *Plays and musicals; band, orchestra, and chorus concerts; adjudicated competitions; recitals; and other extracurricular demonstrations.* Students work hard all year to increase their level of skill. They feel a great deal of pressure to perform well and meet the expectations of parents, teachers, and most of all, themselves.

Add to these major events final exams, prom, school projects, Confirmation, applying for summer jobs, and saying good-bye to friends, it is a wonder that teens have any energy left to think about life at all let alone examine it from a spiritual perspective!

### **The Church's Challenge**

Like all of us, adolescents have a deep hunger for God. They have a need to make sense out of life and a desire to make the world a better place. They are people of endless hope and have the capacity for deep sadness and profound joy. Their hungers, needs, hopes, and moments of sadness and joy mirror the experiences of biblical characters we meet during Lent and the Easter season.

To meet the challenge of making Lent and the Easter season meaningful, parish and youth ministry efforts need to be intentional about bringing alive the Scriptures for each Sunday and

special commemoration of the season. Providing creative ways to study, pray, and reflect on the salvation story helps young people (in fact, all people) focus on the profound mystery of the crucified Jesus and the risen Christ. Offering teens the opportunity to take time out from their busy life to reconnect with God on retreat is a gift to them and to the whole church. The spiritual insights garnered on such events lay the groundwork for a future church that is vibrant and responsive to the Gospel.

Beyond the parish setting, the season calls for church ministers to support teens and their families, helping them to learn together and to create and practice family rituals as they celebrate Lent and Easter—rituals that go beyond coloring eggs and hiding Easter baskets. It is through meaningful rituals that family identity is formed and the bonds of love are strengthened. Teens from families that engage in rituals and devotions are more likely to practice their faith into adulthood and pass their faith on to their children. Memories of palm crosses, Easter hymns, seder meals, Good Friday quiet time, and family attendance at the stations of the cross become part of the Scriptures of family life for generations.

However, in our zeal to keep Lent and Easter as solemn commemorations of sacred events, it is important to acknowledge the reality of our worldly context. Rather than dismiss the cuteness and naïveté of secular expressions (particularly of Easter), we who set the tone for liturgical celebrations would be wise to honor the authentic joy that the people of God experience in such traditions and the hope they associate with the springtime renewal of the earth. Finding the right balance between secular and sacred is key. This manual seeks that balance by providing opportunities for teens, families, and parishes to enter fully into the dying and rising of Lent and Easter.

## **OVERVIEW OF THIS MANUAL**

*Ministry Ideas for Celebrating Lent and Easter with Teens, Families, and Parishes* is a resource manual that provides activities for gathered sessions with youth in parish settings, as well as ideas for meaningful ways to observe the season with families and friends at home and in the community. The first chapter provides a list of quick ideas that users can draw on for years to come to establish rituals, perform service, and create significant memories.

At the core of the manual are gathered sessions with youth that are lectionary based, using themes from the Scriptures. Some sessions are specific to a particular Sunday in one liturgical cycle. Others are more thematically inclusive and may be used with all cycles. In addition to the gathered sessions, supplementary activities for the season include a guided meditation, a service project, and discussion activities that may be used in a variety of ways throughout the season.

Also included are two chapters designed specifically for families. Each chapter contains several activities that will help families share faith stories and create memories. These activities can be sent home or adapted for use in a gathered environment.

## **How to Use This Manual**

The sessions in this manual cover the primary themes of the seasons of Lent and Easter. However, not every Sunday or major observance has its own session. Therefore, these sessions and activities do not have to be used in sequential order, though they may be. Also, each session stands alone. You can pick and choose from among the options without being concerned that the participants need to know something or have experienced an activity from a previous

session in order to understand another. The bottom line is that this manual is designed to supplement your existing catechetical program. It is not intended to replace it. You can use as many or as few sessions as you want in order to enhance the ongoing formation of young people in your setting.

Read through *Ministry Ideas for Celebrating Lent and Easter with Teens, Families, and Parishes* as far ahead of the actual season as possible. Some of the activities require preparation. Allow yourself adequate time to get ready.

Many of the chapters include fully developed sessions with youth. Based on the lectionary readings, the sessions engage young people in the theme of each Sunday of Lent, the Triduum observance, and the Easter season with dynamic activities that tap into teens' lived experiences and challenge them to live out the Gospel message presented. Each session can stand alone, although the lectionary themes of the season build on one another. Chapter 1 is filled with ideas and activities that can be used as a springboard for further development of the sessions or as stand-alone ideas or activities.

Think beyond using the ideas only with youth. Many of the activities in this manual can be easily adapted for use in children's programs, in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and adult sessions, and with intergenerational gatherings.

### **Music**

Ideally, music throughout the liturgical year should be coordinated with selections that teens will hear and sing as part of Eucharistic liturgies. When choosing music, consider consulting with the parish music director. He or she will know the parish repertoire, the music with which people are most familiar. In addition, most parish hymnals have indexes for liturgical seasons and themes, which can be a quick reference when looking for songs.

### **Handouts and Resources**

All necessary handouts and resources are found at the end of each chapter in this manual.

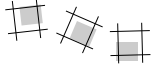
## **RESOURCES**

Additional strategies and ideas for celebrating the seasons of Lent and Easter with young people, families, and parish communities can be found on the Saint Mary's Press Web site. Go to [www.smp.org](http://www.smp.org) and conduct a search using key words such as *Lent*, *Easter*, *Triduum*, *Ascension*, and *Pentecost*.

## **YOUR COMMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS**

Saint Mary's Press wants to know your reactions to the strategies in *Ministry Ideas for Celebrating Lent and Easter with Teens, Families, and Parishes*. We are also interested in new youth-ministry strategies for use with youth, families, and parishes. If you have comments or suggestions, please contact us at [smp@smp.org](mailto:smp@smp.org).





# Quick Ideas

## INTRODUCTION

Listed below are strategies and ideas for celebrating the seasons of Lent and Easter with young people, families, and parish communities. Many of them can take place in gathered settings. Some can be adapted for use in the home.

Use these quick ideas as they are, or allow them to spark your creativity as you adapt them to your setting, your situation, and your parish community.

### Acrostic Prayers

Divide the participants into small groups and give each group a sheet of newsprint and markers. Tell them to write the word *Easter* down the side of the newsprint. They are to write a line of a prayer that begins with each letter. You may want to share this example:

**E**arly one morning

**A**fter a horrible death two days earlier

**S**omething wonderful happened.

**T**he stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty.

**E**nding our slavery to sin

**R**ejoice! Jesus is Risen!

You could use the same process with other seasonal words, depending on the theme of your gathering. For example, you might use *Alleluia*, *Footwashing*, *Lent*, *Pentecost*, *Ascension*, *New Life*, *Repent*, or *Passion*.

(Debbie Trafton O'Neal, *Before and After Easter: Activities and Ideas for Lent to Pentecost*, p. 39)

### Book of Remembrance

This activity is useful anytime, but it especially ties in with the Gospel reading about Jesus and Lazarus offered for the fifth Sunday of Lent.

Provide a small notebook for each participant. Encourage them to keep track of memories of Lent and Easter: practices, thoughts, prayers, insights, and stories. They could also use the book to record “legacies of love”—stories about loved ones and what they learned from these people. For example, one entry might begin “From my Grandmother Anna I learned about taking pride in who I am.”

### **Campus Outreach**

Provide some spiritual mentoring for college students from your parish via e-mail or regular mail during the seasons of Lent and Easter. Each week, send a note with the readings of the week, some questions for reflection, and an action that is practical in their environment and will help them live the message of the Scriptures. Also include notes of encouragement for the journey to the cross and beyond.

You might also send campus care packages—treats and necessities of college life. Solicit donations from the parish and engage the services of teens to pack and send the items.

### **Building Community**

Create a brick wall in a parish gathering area as part of the celebration of Pentecost—the “birthday” of the church. To do this, each person will need a brick. You could use rectangular boxes, brick-shaped Styrofoam pieces, or create bricks out of foam board.

Invite each participant to write her or his name on the brick and a word or phrase describing what talent she or he is willing to offer the community. It should be something that will contribute to the growth of the church, carrying on the work of Jesus’s disciples begun at the celebration of Pentecost after Jesus’s death and Resurrection.

In a gathering area of the parish, symbolically construct the church’s foundation by stacking the bricks together. Make extra bricks available so that anyone in the parish can add to the foundation by contributing his or her gifts.

### **Create a Calendar**

Work with teens to create a Lenten calendar for all young people in the parish. It might include a scriptural verse for each day, a reflection question, and an action that is appropriate and achievable. Send it to all young people in the parish before Ash Wednesday.

If you have ample space in a gathering area, you might also create a wall-sized calendar for the parish, using one sheet of paper for each day of Lent. Be sure that the words are large enough to be seen from a distance.

### **Cultural Celebrations**

If ethnic traditions are part of the seasonal festivities for families in the parish, host an evening devoted to Easter customs. Invite families in the parish to tell the young people about cultural practices of the season. For example, you might have a family with Ukrainian roots talk about the intricately painted Easter eggs known as *pysanky*. A family whose ancestors came from Poland could talk about the tradition of blessing baskets of food on Holy Saturday. A family

with ties to Mexico might lead the group in making woven palm crosses and other items for Palm Sunday or demonstrate the Easter tradition known as “Mary’s Tears.” Though not practiced much anymore, young couples would knock on the door of their neighbors and ask, “Is the Virgin of Grief weeping here?” If the response was in the affirmative, the couple would enter the home and drink a cup of water (representing tears) in front of an “altar of fire”—an arrangement containing a picture of Mary, candles, pine branches, and seeds. On Holy Thursday in Guadalajara the tradition of visiting seven churches (symbolizing Jesus’s visits before he was crucified) is still alive.

### **Easter Baskets for the Homebound and the Needy**

During Lent, gather items and conduct fund-raisers to purchase items for elderly people who are homebound or poor families in need. Organize these items in Easter baskets and have young people deliver them on Holy Saturday.

Work with the parish or diocesan staff members or community service agencies to find names and discuss the needs of the recipients. For example, an elderly person who is homebound may not be able to eat sweets, so an Easter basket filled with candy would be useless and even harmful. Instead, they might appreciate postage stamps, gift certificates for home maintenance services such as window washing or grass cutting, or hobby supplies. A poor family could use gift cards for grocery stores and discount stores, eggs and egg decorating supplies, Easter candy, and food staples.

You might have the young people write their own prayers and include them in the baskets. They could also copy hope-filled scriptural verses on index cards, decorate the cards, and add them to the other gifts.

### **First-Person Perspectives**

Divide the young people into small groups. Assign each group a major character in the story of the Jesus’s death and Resurrection. You might use Peter, Mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, Pontius Pilate, John, a Roman soldier, or Thomas. Direct the participants to develop a first-person reflection on the experience through the eyes of their character and present it to the group. For example, they could use a talk show format, an interview on a news show, a journal entry, an article for the school paper, or a conversation between friends that starts with the question “How was your weekend?”

### **Giving Tree**

Set up a giving tree in your parish, similar to the ones that are popular during the Christmas season. Instead of an evergreen, however, arrange bare branches in a pot of sand. Hang crosses on the tree with suggestions for giving. Instead of toys and gifts that are generally solicited at Christmas time, consider one of the following options:

- Make it a “choose-a-chore” tree. Canvass elderly members of the parish and those who are homebound. Ask what they need done around the house. Parish members choose which chore they are able to do. You might want to include chores around the parish grounds as well. For safety purposes young people should not go to anyone’s home on their own. Assign a “buddy system” or better yet have an entire family take on a chore.

- Make it a “life’s-necessities” tree. Suggest purchasing gift cards and gift certificates for grocery stores, discount stores, and inexpensive restaurants. Give the cards to an organization or agency that works with needy families.
- Make it a “fill-the-pantry” tree. Many food pantries are stretched for supplies by spring. Write the name of a pantry staple on each cross and ask people to purchase a set quantity. For example, on one cross you might suggest “five jars of peanut butter,” on another “four boxes of cereal,” and so forth.

### **Hygiene Buckets for the Homeless**

Ask members of the parish each to bring a different hygiene item to Sunday liturgy. For example, you could collect bar soap on the first Sunday of Lent, toothpaste and toothbrushes on the second Sunday, and so forth. Check with a social service agency in your community to find out what the most needed items might be. Place large buckets at the entrances of the church to collect the supplies. During Holy Week, gather the teens of the parish to put together bags of hygiene supplies for homeless people. Deliver them to a homeless shelter in your community or to an agency that serves the poor.

You could also solicit cash donations. Use the money to purchase coupons for food at inexpensive restaurants located in the vicinity of a shelter. Add these coupons to the hygiene bags.

### **Laetare Sunday Card to the Parish**

The fourth Sunday of Lent is known as Laetare Sunday. Laetare (pronounced, “lay-TAH-ray”) is Latin for “rejoice.” It is the first word in the entrance antiphon that Sunday. It sets a tone of joyful anticipation of Easter.

Use large sheets of foam board hinged together to create this giant card from the young people to the parish. At the top of the “card” write the word *Laetare!* Underneath add the sentence starter “I look forward to Easter because . . .” Invite all the young people of the parish to add their thoughts and sign their name.

### **Lenten Hopes**

Between Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday of Lent, ask the young people to think about three hopes they have for the Lenten season. For example, they might hope to make time to be quiet each day, perform anonymous acts of kindness, or make it a point to eat dinner with the family. Have them seal their hopes in an envelope and write their name and address on it. Shortly after Easter, send the envelopes to them. Include a few reflection questions such as these:

- Which hopes were realized? Which were not? Why?
- What would you do differently if you could do Lent over again?
- What do you want to remember for next Lent?

### **Life-Giving Water**

Use this activity as part of a longer session around the third Sunday of Lent. The Gospel (the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults option) for that Sunday is the story of the woman and the well (John 4:5–42).

Give each participant an unopened bottle of water. Make paper, tape, and art supplies available. Direct them to create a new label that advertises Jesus's life-giving water, his unconditional love, and his promise of new life in Christ.

### **Light Icebreaker**

This activity is useful in conjunction with the fourth Sunday of Lent, since the theme of the scriptural readings is seeing in the dark. Brainstorm with the participants various kinds of lights and list them on newsprint. The list might include things like starlight, a floor lamp, a spotlight, stage lights, a camera flash, a headlight, a night-light, and so forth.

When you have filled a page with different lights, ask the question "What kind of light are you?" You may want to offer some examples like these:

- I am like a headlight. People talk to me, and I help them see where they're going.
- I am like a floor lamp. I like to make things comfortable and cozy for my friends.
- I am like a camera flash. I try to bring out the best in people.

Allow the participants a few seconds to think about their choices. Have them share their thoughts with a partner, the small group, or with the full group. You might want to follow up with the question "What kind of light is God?"

### **Locker Lunch Bags**

This activity should be done before Ash Wednesday or as early in the season as possible. Count the number of school days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Work with the group to come up with good deeds and random acts of kindness that can be done within the school community. You will need one suggestion for every school day. If they are stuck for ideas, offer a few suggestions like these:

- Talk to someone who is sitting in class or eating lunch alone.
- Pick up a few pieces of trash on the school grounds on your way out after school.
- Say thank-you to a teacher who made you think today.

You might also include a few scriptural verses for reflection. Compile the suggestions into one list, and make a copy of the list for every participant.

Give every person a brown paper lunch bag. If time allows, suggest that they decorate their bag with pictures and words cut from magazines that describe what Lent is about. Distribute the lists and tell the young people to cut apart the suggestions and put them in the bag. Encourage them to hang the bag in their locker.

At the beginning of each school day they should randomly choose a suggestion and do it sometime during the day, taking care not to draw any attention to their actions. If a scriptural verse is included, they might want to tape it on the outside of a notebook that they carry all day and think about the message every time they see it.

### **Object Prayer**

Gather a variety of common Lenten and Easter symbols. Pass the items around the group and have each person choose one. Provide index cards and ask the participants to write a one-line prayer focusing on that object. Some examples follow:

- Butterfly: God, help me through the changes in my life.
- Stone: God, I pray for all the people who have stone-cold hearts.
- Marshmallow chick: Stick with me God; I need the sweetness of your love more than ever.

### **Operation Rice Bowl Supper**

Host a parish supper for the benefit of Operation Rice Bowl. The most likely time to sponsor an event like this is during Lent. However, the issue of global hunger is not a seasonal issue. Serve a simple menu and use the opportunity to educate the parish about global hunger. Many educational and support materials are available through Catholic Relief Services.

### **Palm Crosses**

In many cultures, making crosses out of palm leaves is a Palm Sunday tradition. If you know someone who does this, ask him or her to work with the young people of the parish to create crosses for themselves, their families, or all the members of the parish. Have the young people distribute them on Palm Sunday.

If no one in your parish knows how to make them, you can find a variety of resources online, in the library, and in books of Christian crafts. The plans range from a small cross with a few simple folds to very elaborate creations.

### **Pentecost Kites**

As part of a longer session about Pentecost, take the young people outdoors to fly kites. If time allows, have them make their own Pentecost kite. Kite-making kits are available in craft stores. They are easy to make and can be decorated with symbols of Pentecost and messages of peace.

Lead the young people in a discussion of how kite flying connects to Pentecost. Remind them that the Apostles first heard a rush of wind and they knew it was the Spirit that Jesus had promised them. Talk about how God keeps our souls airborne and how the Holy Spirit is the wind beneath our wings.

### **Pentecost Language Explorations**

The first reading for Pentecost Sunday tells us that “. . . each one heard them speaking in the native language of each” (Acts of the Apostles 2:6). To convey this effect at a session around Pentecost, recruit three or four people who speak languages other than English to read all or part of Acts of the Apostles 2:1–11 in their own language. Each reader will need a Bible or lectionary written in that language. Discuss with the participants the role of language, the mystery of language, and the power of language.

As part of the session, have someone teach the young people a short prayer or hymn in a foreign language. Celebrate the diversity of the Catholic community.

(Maryann Hakowski, *Sharing the Sunday Scriptures with Youth, Cycle B*, p. 62)

## Prayer Chain

Cut one-inch-wide strips of construction paper, using the colors of Lent: purple and pink. Each person or family will need one strip for each day, starting with Ash Wednesday and ending with Holy Saturday. Have the participants write a short prayer topic or request on each strip of paper. The prayers may be personal or may concern social and community issues. Glue the ends of the strips together to form a chain. Instruct them to hang the chain in a place where they will see it every day. Starting with Ash Wednesday, they should rip off one strip and say a prayer based on that request or topic.

## Rosary for Peace and Justice

Lead the young people in a rosary while helping them reflect on Lenten themes of peace and justice. *A Rosary for Peace* with reflections from liturgical texts, *A Scriptural Rosary for Justice and Peace* with biblical reflections, and *Unity in Diversity: A Scriptural Rosary* are all available from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

## Seasonal Cards

Send postcards or notes to all young people in the parish during each week of Lent and the Easter season. With each card, include a verse from the Sunday Scriptures, a reflection question or two, encouragement for the journey, and suggestions for living out the message.

## Senior Companions

Recruit senior citizens in the parish who are willing to partner with young people for weekly meetings and activities. During each week of Lent, bring them together for faith sharing, prayer, and guided conversation. They might also share a simple meal, make Easter decorations, or fill Easter baskets for shut-ins or needy families.

## Soap Crosses

Give each person a bar of soap that is soft (like Ivory Soap) and a plastic knife. Direct them to carve a cross out of the soap. You might want to provide pencils so they can draw the outline before they begin carving. Invite the participants to share their ideas about what the soap cross has to do with Lent. If it does not come up, remind them that through his death and Resurrection, Jesus washed away our sins.

After everyone has made a cross, give each person an index card and provide pens and markers. Direct them to write Psalm 51:2 on the index card: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." Allow them to decorate the card as time allows.

Tell the young people to take the soap cross and card home with them. Post the card in a place where they will see it when they wash their hands. Encourage them to use the soap cross throughout Lent and repeat the verse of the Psalm every time they do so.

(Debbie Trafton O'Neal, *Before and After Easter: Activities and Ideas for Lent to Pentecost*, p. 9)

### **Something Is Different**

After Easter, challenge the young people—and the entire parish—with the question, “How has the Resurrection of Jesus changed you?” Keep the question in front of them as much as possible for about a week before you meet. Be creative with your methods. Some examples follow:

- Post the question in gathering areas, on doors, and in other places where people might not expect to see it.
- Put the question on postcards and send them home to the young people.
- Arrange to have the question printed in the bulletin in a way that catches people’s eye.
- Send an e-mail with the question in the subject line.
- Wear a button with the question printed on it.
- Make a banner and hang it in an obvious place.

When you meet, use the question as the focus of conversation, reflection, and prayer.

### **Stations of the Cross**

The devotion known as stations of the cross is common prayer practice in most Catholic parishes during Lent. Dozens of versions of these fourteen scenarios are available from Catholic publishers. Some are for personal use, some for community prayer. Actively engage the young people in your parish in praying this devotion in a way that is meaningful for them and can be shared with the rest of the parish. Consider the following options:

- Prepare each station as a shadow drama. Teens silently act out the scene behind a sheet with lighting to create shadows. Use scriptural readings and short prayers to accompany each scene.
- Create a freeze frame scene for each station, using no props. The teens may only use themselves. They should also write a prayer connecting the station to their own life.
- Create a collage for each station with words and photographs of modern-day connections to each station. For example, the first station, “Jesus is condemned to death,” could be accompanied by a story of prisoners on death row or a picture of an electric chair. Display these collages in a parish gathering area.
- Take the stations out of the parish and into the city. Plan a walking route around town, stopping at various locations to pray the station and offer reflections. For example, the fourth station, “Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry his cross,” might be done in front of a soup kitchen or shelter. A women’s shelter would be a good place to pray the eighth station, “Jesus speaks to the women of Jerusalem.”

### **Stone Pendants**

Stones are a common symbol of Lent. One of the devil’s temptations to Jesus in the desert was to turn stones into bread (the first Sunday of Lent). We are challenged not to harden our hearts so they become like stone (the third Sunday of Lent). Our Lenten journey is filled with stones in the road that cause us to stumble. However, a stone can also be a sign of Easter freedom. The first sign that Jesus had risen from the dead was that the stone was rolled away.

Provide each person with a small flat stone and yarn, ribbon, or cord. Explain that they are to wrap the stone with the yarn, ribbon, or cord until it is secure. They should also include enough length to hang the stone around their neck. Suggest that they wear the stone through-



out the season as a reminder of their commitment to follow Jesus in spite of the obstacles they might encounter in the road ahead.

## **Voices of Easter**

The days surrounding Jesus's death and Resurrection were filled with anger, hatred, denial, betrayal, and deception, among other things. However, voices of courage, adoration, and affirmation also emerged. This concept engages the imagination of young people by helping them isolate the perspective and contribution of the following individuals:

- Judas: Voice of Betrayal
- Peter: Voice of Denial
- Chief Priests: Voices of Deception
- Caiaphas: Voice of Condemnation
- Pilate: Voice of Evasion
- The Mob: Voices of Hatred
- The Thief: Voice of Faith
- The Centurion: Voice of Affirmation
- Joseph of Arimathea: Voice of Courage
- Mary Magdalene: Voice of Adoration
- Cleopas: Voice of Assurance
- Thomas: Voice of Doubt

There are several ways to use this concept with young people or with an intergenerational gathering. Consider the following options, although you may come up with others on your own:

- Assign each person a partner and give each pair one of the voices. Have the young people look up references to the person in all four Gospels and discuss the following:
  - Why is this person on the list?
  - How did Jesus respond to the person?
  - What does this person have to teach us today?
- For older teens, assign each pair one voice and tell them to develop and present an interview with that person. You might also have them develop a conversation between the person and Jesus to help them imagine how Jesus might have reacted.
- Choose several voices and conduct a Lenten retreat, using each voice as the focus for prayer, discussion, and quiet reflection.
- Invite older teens to write a paragraph on one of the voices. Include their writings in the parish bulletin throughout Lent and the Easter season.
- Provide a variety of news magazines and newspapers. Ask the participants to find words and pictures that show how the voices are still active in our world.
- Use this exercise as the basis of an examination of conscience prior to a Lenten Reconciliation service.

(This activity is based on an Internet presentation by Dr. Woodrow Krolland and Keith Ghormley, titled *The Twelve Voices of Easter*, at [www.backtothebible.org/easter](http://www.backtothebible.org/easter).)

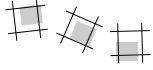
### **Volunteer Giving Tree**

Put together a booklet of groups and agencies that need volunteer help and welcome the help of teenagers. Distribute these booklets to the teens in your parish before Ash Wednesday.

In a gathering area of your parish, arrange some bare tree branches in a container of sand. Cut out a supply of blank paper crosses. Each time someone does volunteer work within or outside of the parish, have that person write her or his name on a cross along with the activity and the date and hang it on a branch. The goal is to fill up the tree with crosses, each one representing a gift of self.

### **Web of Community**

Use this prayer in conjunction with a session on Christian community. Have the participants stand in a circle. Explain that everyone will get a chance to complete the sentence, "My prayer for our faith community is . . ." or another sentence starter of your choice. Give one person a ball of yarn. Direct him or her to complete the sentence starter, then hold the end of the yarn and toss the ball to someone across the circle. That person should complete the sentence starter, hold onto the yarn and toss the ball to someone else. Continue until everyone has shared a prayer and is holding yarn. Invite the young people to share their reflections on the web of love they created in the process of expressing their prayers.



# Ash Wednesday

## Project Clear the Clutter: An Activity for Spiritual Awareness and Focus

### OVERVIEW

Lent offers an opportunity for us to do a bit of spring cleaning in our souls and sweep out the cobwebs of our lives. It is a time to let go of old habits that drain our souls and to embrace life-giving ways of being. This session helps participants focus on the need for spiritual focus by challenging them to rid themselves of the clutter and busyness that keeps them from looking deep into the face of Jesus as they join him on the journey to the cross and the Resurrection.

### Suggested Time

60 minutes

### PREPARATION

- Gather the following items
  - a purple cloth
  - a pillar candle
  - Lenten faith symbols, such as sand, thorns, ashes, and a cross
  - soft heart shapes made out of felt or craft foam, about 1-inch wide, one for each participant
  - a metal bucket or a basket
  - assorted items regularly used by teens, such as CDs and DVDs, snacks, a portable music player, clothing, posters, magazines, and so forth
  - a recording of reflective instrumental music (optional)
  - a cassette or CD player (optional)
  - stones, about 1-inch wide, one for each participant
  - blank paper
  - pens or pencils, one for each participant
  - copies of handout 1, "Project Clear the Clutter," one for each participant
  - copies of *The Catholic Youth Bible*<sup>TM</sup> or another Bible, one for each participant
  - boxes for packing the display items
- Create a prayer space using a purple cloth, a pillar candle, the Lenten symbols, a bucket or basket of hearts, and a Bible.

## PROCEDURE

- If you wish, choose a song from your parish hymnal on the theme of changing hearts. The song should be one that is familiar to the participants from Sunday liturgy. Provide the participants with copies of the hymnal.
- Set up another area with a display of the items used often by teens. The more cluttered the space, the better the effect.

**1.** Gather the participants around the prayer table and invite them to be quiet and still. You may want to begin playing reflective music at this time. Distribute the stones and ask the participants to think about what the stones represent in our life. After a few seconds of silence, invite the participants to offer their thoughts. They may compare the stones to sin, temptation, or hardness of heart. Offer your own ideas as well.

Explain to the participants that they are to hold their stone in their hand throughout the session.

**2.** Ask someone to light the candle as you proclaim Psalm 95:3–8. Close the prayer by singing a familiar hymn on the theme of changing hearts, if you chose one before the session.

**3.** Gather the participants in the area you prepared with items often used by teens. Give them a chance to observe the area, then ask the following questions:

- How is this display like life?
- What does it have to do with the season of Lent?

Summarize their comments, emphasizing that the clutter represents life. Most of us have lots of material possessions that sometimes stand in the way of being who we are called to be by God. During Lent, the church invites us to put aside our clutter and enter the desert with Jesus. Along with Jesus, we take time to listen to God and reflect on God's plan for us. We can do this by simplifying life and staying away from distractions.

**4.** Give each person a sheet of paper and a pen or pencil. Explain that they are to make a list of all the "stuff" they have in their room. They should include approximate numbers when possible, such as the number of pairs of jeans, video games, CDs, posters, books, and so forth.

The list they create is private and should not be shared with others. Encourage them to move to a part of the room where they will not be distracted.

**5.** Ask the participants to review their list and to cross out anything that is not absolutely necessary to carry on the tasks of daily life. In some cases it might mean reducing the number of items. For example, if they have six pairs of jeans, could they do with two?

Give the participants a minute or two to make their choices. Emphasize again that the assignment is to be done privately and quietly.

**6.** When everyone has made their choices, lead a discussion of the following questions:

- Was it difficult to narrow down your choices? Why or why not?
- Why did you choose the things you chose?
- Why did you choose to eliminate certain items?

**7.** Explain that they are now to flip over their sheet of paper and make a list of all the things that are most often on their minds, for example, worries about grades, family “stuff,” arguments with friends, how to spend the weekend, and so forth. After spending a few minutes considering this list, ask the participants to now cross off some of those things and replace them with ways they could spend time in prayerful reflection.

**8.** Distribute copies of handout 1, “Project Clear the Clutter.” Present the idea to the participants as a way of entering into the spirit of Lent by making the following points:

- Lent is a time to “go to the desert” with Jesus. It is a time to let go of some of the things that clutter our life so that we can focus on our mission of discipleship. It is not wrong to have material possessions. However, during Lent it is a good idea to focus on our spiritual growth rather than focusing on our growing list of possessions.
- Minimizing the stuff in your room is a good place to start. It would reduce the overflow of stimuli that might carry you away from your focus on your Lenten journey. If you change your surroundings, you are more likely to change your focus and your perspective.
- We remove the clutter in our churches as well. After the color and splendor of the Christmas season and the first weeks of Ordinary Time, we scale back for Lent. The decorations are scant, the colors change, and the music is different.
- Project Clear the Clutter is about helping you change your perspective for Lent by suggesting actions like these:
  - Take down any posters in your room that do not reflect Christian values.
    - Put away any music that does not reflect Christian values.
    - Wear only clothing that projects a Christian image. The clothing should be clean and modest with no advertisements for commercial products and no words, slogans, or pictures that are hurtful, immoral, or suggestive.
    - Watch only television shows and videos that reflect Christian values.
    - Do not play violent video games.
    - Refrain from looking at teen magazines that focus on looks, beauty, and material things.
- The purpose of these sacrifices is not to make you suffer and miss out on all the things you usually enjoy. Rather, it is to help you clear out the clutter in your life so that you are directing your focus on your faith and putting that faith into action instead of being preoccupied with things that fill your mind with unholy thoughts.

**9.** Explain that the handout will guide them through the cleaning process for the six weeks of Lent. It provides suggestions for eliminating items each week as well as ideas for putting faith into action as a disciple of Jesus. Emphasize that participation is entirely voluntary, and each person can choose to implement all of the suggestions or just a few.

Allow the participants time to ask questions about the project and mull over whether or not they want to participate. Some may be reluctant to commit to anything drastic. Encourage them to try at least one suggestion from the handout each week. You may want to assign each person a partner and suggest that the participants check in with each other on the progress of their choices for this Lenten activity. This could ensure better outcomes if they knew others were joining them in this effort.

**10.** Distribute the bibles to the participants. Lead them through the following prayer service as a way of symbolically entering the “desert” of Lent:

- Invite someone to proclaim Matthew 4:1–11. Note that the passage provides us with a concrete example of Christ’s humanity. Jesus went into the desert to get away from distractions and focus on his Father alone. However, the tempter approached Jesus in those sparse surroundings. Even there Jesus struggled with temptation, just as we do.
- Take down posters and art work in the gathering area and pack up and put away all the items in the display area. Try and make the space as sparse as possible. Leave the items in the prayer space intact.
- Invite the participants to a few seconds of silent reflection on the following questions:
  - What will a “desert” way of life look like for you this Lent?
  - How will removing certain things from your life open a pathway to hearing God’s voice?
  - If you quiet your thoughts and remove internal clutter, how might you hear God more clearly?
  - What are you looking forward to about your desert experience? What will be a challenge for you?
- Read together Matthew 6:1–18. Ask the participants to explain the message of the passage. Be sure they know that the passage is about the way a person should act when in her or his “desert.”
- Pass around the bucket of soft hearts. Tell the participants to throw their stone in the bucket and take a soft heart if they are willing to enter the desert with Jesus during the season of Lent.
- Offer the following prayer:

We come before you, O God of Hope, to remember your son Jesus in the desert. During this time he reflected on his role in your plan of salvation. For forty days he fasted and prayed to prepare for the journey of carrying his message to the hearts of your people. So we, too, prepare ourselves for our role in your plan. We pledge to remove the clutter in our lives so that we may listen more closely and hear your voice within us. We turn away from sin that leads us away from you, O God, so that we may honor you with softened hearts. Amen.
- Ask the participants to leave the room quietly.

# Project Clear the Clutter

## Ash Wednesday

Give your room a Lenten makeover. Dust, vacuum, and get rid of the clutter. Take down posters and pictures that do not reflect Christian values. Remove magazines that focus on worldly beauty, clothing, and material things.

## Week One

*Scripture.* Matthew 4:1–11 (Jesus in the desert)

*Emptying.* Put away CDs, violent video games, DVDs, books (except for school books, of course) and anything in your room that does not promote Christian values.

*Actions.*

- Sell some of your CDs, DVDs and video games by contacting a music store or getting together with some friends to have a rummage sale. Donate the money you make from selling your stuff to a local charity.
- Place one or more faith symbols somewhere in your room. Read the Scripture passage each day and think about the temptations and distractions in your own life that keep you from focusing on God.

## Week Two

*Scripture.* Mark 9:2–10 (the Transfiguration)

*Emptying.* Transform an area of your room into a prayer space. Place your Bible in the space along with a purple cloth, a candle, and a few simple Lenten symbols.

*Actions.*

- Each day explore a different style of prayer. You might do scriptural reading, write in a prayer journal, say the rosary, listen to inspirational music, or read something about faith and spirituality.
- Find a quiet space in your yard, a park, or another natural setting. Be still; feel and listen to God with your heart.

## Week Three

*Scripture.* John 2: 3–25 (the cleansing of the Temple)

*Emptying.* Get rid of junk food, soft drinks, and snacks. Eat and drink only things that are healthy for you. Remember that your body is a temple, created by God.

*Actions.*

- Donate money that you would normally spend on junk food to an agency that feeds the hungry.

- Reflect on the story of Jesus in the Temple each day. Consider ways you might express righteous anger over unresolved moral issues such as poverty, hunger, racism, and right-to-life issues.

## **Week Four**

*Scripture.* Luke 15:1–32 (the prodigal son)

*Emptying.* Free up your calendar so that you have some time away from your friends and other social activities.

*Actions.*

- Spend some time alone each day reflecting on the reading from Luke. Consider ways to spend quality time with your family. Practice patience. Offer your help to family members. Appreciate the time you have with them.
- Consider this question: “From whom do I need to ask forgiveness?” Talk with that person or write a letter conveying your apology and asking to be forgiven.

## **Week Five**

*Scripture.* John 8:1–11 (a woman caught in adultery)

*Emptying.* Get rid of bad language and put-downs. Avoid gossip and speak kindly of others.

*Actions.*

- When you read this scriptural passage each day remember how compassionate and forgiving Jesus was. Demonstrate this same compassion toward others. Build people up instead of putting them down. Be kind to everyone, including yourself.
- Celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation. Attend a Reconciliation service at your parish or go to confession during one of the scheduled times.

## **Holy Week**

*Scripture.* Luke 23:44–47 (Jesus’s death)

*Emptying.* Resist all of the distractions from your room, such as television, radio, game console, and whatever else keeps you preoccupied.

*Actions.*

- Consider the things in your life that you should let “die out,” such as impatience, bad language, unkindness, or other bad habits. Prepare to embrace a new life of improved attitudes.
- Decide how much of the simpler lifestyle that you have lived for the past six weeks you want to maintain. Give away or sell all the things you will no longer need.



# Acknowledgments

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“The Prayer of Saint Francis” on handout 3 and on page 96 is attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, 1181–1226. Quoted from *Lord, Hear Our Prayer*, revised edition, compiled by William G. Storey and Thomas McNally (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2000), page 56.

On resource 8, the heroes information on Benazir Bhutto is drawn from the Women’s International Center Biography Web site, [www.wic.org](http://www.wic.org), accessed May 25, 2005; on Dorothy Day is adapted from the Catholic Worker Movement Web site, at [www.catholicworker.org/index.cfm](http://www.catholicworker.org/index.cfm), accessed May 25, 2005; on Clotilde Dedecker is adapted from the *Buffalo News*, March 9, 2005, and April 21, 2005; on Kim Gugino is quoted and used with permission of the author; on Phil Lane Jr. is drawn from Four Worlds Center for Development Learning Web site, at [www.fourworlds.ca/who002\\_001.html](http://www.fourworlds.ca/who002_001.html), accessed May 25, 2005; on Nelson Mandela is adapted from “Biography of Nelson Mandela,” on the African National Congress Web site, [www.anc.org.za/people/mandela.html](http://www.anc.org.za/people/mandela.html), accessed May 25, 2005; on Andrew Pappachristos and Winfred Rembert Jr. is adapted from *What Do You Stand For?: A Kid’s Guide to*

*Building Character*, by Barbara Lewis (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1998), pages 100–101 and 141. Copyright © 1998 by Barbara A. Lewis; on Sr. Helen Prejean is drawn from her Web site, [www.prejean.org](http://www.prejean.org), accessed May 25, 2005; and on Andrew Storer is quoted and used with permission of the author.

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#### **Endnotes Cited in Quotations from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church***

1. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, instruction, *Donum vitae*, introduction, page 5.