



Finding God

Our Response to God's Gifts

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Special seasonal issue by *Marina McCoy*

What Are God's Invitations?

Traditionally, Lent is characterized by three main practices: increased prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Ideally, we participate in these practices at other times of the year too. During Lent, however, we choose to be more attentive and deliberate about how these practices help us grow in relationship with God and other people.

Sometimes, however, we can too easily treat Lent as a time for self-improvement. Or we can take up the same practices as always without much reflection:



for example, giving up chocolate or alcohol for Lent, and then going back to our same habits when Easter arrives.

But Lent can be a much deeper experience. Lent is not a stand-alone season. It is a season that draws us ever nearer to Easter, a time of rejoicing and celebrating in the Resurrection and God's promise of new life. Easter then leads us to Pentecost, when we are given the gifts of the Holy Spirit and are invited to partake in God's mission of healing this world and bringing it peace and

justice. Lent can be a time of preparing us for celebrating and preparing us to be in closer friendship with God so that we can share in God's mission. What do we need to do to get ready?

Our tradition teaches that God offers us the grace we need to grow in holiness. God invites, and then we respond. This Lent, we can ask ourselves: What are God's invitations? Perhaps I can let go of the idea of Lent as a project of self-improvement, and instead approach it a little more as a surrender to God's desires for me.

May this newsletter help you and your families recognize how God is inviting you to grow in faith, hope, and love. †



Lenten Prayer

Loving God,

We begin this season of Lent with gratitude for all that you have given to us and the recognition that we are called to lead lives of love in response to these gifts.

Help us grow in friendship with you and show increased love for all of God's people.

Illuminate our minds, soften our hearts, strengthen our resolve, and build up our communities, with you, Lord, at the center.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

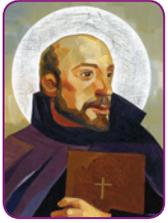
A CALL TO HOLINESS

"Do not be afraid of holiness. It will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self. To depend on God sets us free from every form of enslavement and leads us to recognize our great dignity."

Pope Francis

DISCERNMENT 101

Discernment is a process of learning how to listen and respond to God. It helps you make decisions through praying, noticing thoughts and feelings, and then making a choice about how to act in a way that is true to God's will.



SAINT IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA (1491–1556)

offers concrete advice for how to listen. For those of us already striving to lead holy lives, he says that we ought to especially pay attention to the kinds of actions, thoughts, or desires that lead us to experience consolation: that is, feelings of peace, joy, freedom, forgiveness, healing, and connection to others. These feelings are signs that help us see where God is drawing us in in our own lives. Desolation can also teach us that when we notice that we consistently feel sad, trapped, anxious, or are drawn away from care and connection to others, this is not a direction in which God is leading.

God was leading me to spend less time on social media and more time connecting to my family and nature.

For example, one Lent I gave up social media. I had noticed that any feelings of pleasure I derived from social media did not last long. I was becoming easily distracted by always checking my

phone. Conversely, whenever I went on nature walks with my family, I was always left with a lingering sense of awe and gratitude. These feelings of consolation confirmed for me that God was leading me to spend less time on social media and more time connecting to my family and nature.

One way to discern what God is inviting you to do is to go back and review in prayer with God some recent times when you felt a particular sense of peace, connection, renewal, or love. Where do you feel that God is drawing you? You can also take an honest look at the obstacles that prevent you from being closer to God and others. God tends to be gentle about this with us, and we can have this same attitude of gentleness toward ourselves as we examine our weaknesses. ■



What Is God Inviting You to Do?

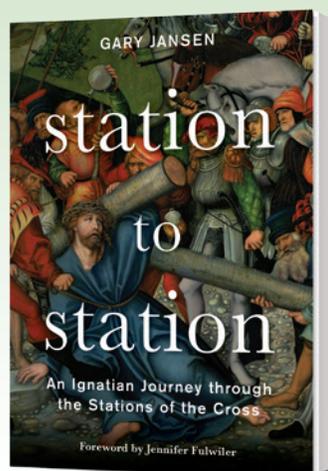
Discuss as a family any or all of the questions below; the answers can help you discern what God is inviting you to do. They may even surprise you!

- If God were to ask you to give up one thing for 24 hours, what do you think it might be?
- What is a gift for which you are thankful but sometimes take for granted? How could you share this gift with others?
- Where is God inviting you to take a step toward healing or reconciliation of a relationship?
- What social issue especially attracts your attention, and what one simple action might God invite you to practice?
- How might you invite God into your life this Lent? ■

Why Do We Suffer?

In *Station to Station*, Gary Jansen uses the scriptural Way of the Cross to focus our minds and hearts on Jesus' anguish and Death. Walking through each station, we see the unique ways in which Jesus responded to suffering, and we are challenged to react similarly in our own struggles. ■

Station to Station by Gary Jansen (Loyola Press, 2017)



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IMAGINATIVE PRAYER

Saint Ignatius of Loyola recommended a way of praying with the imagination. He suggests that we read a gospel passage and then imagine it, allowing the story to unfold in a spontaneous and personal way. In this practice, we allow ourselves to wonder and to imagine aspects of the story that might otherwise escape our notice.

For example, imagine the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) from the point of view of the son. As you read the passage, imagine yourself in the scene:



You have been walking for a long time, and your feet are tired. The chunk of bread that you brought from the last town is now nothing more than a crust in your pocket. You have been thinking about what you want to say to your father: “Let me work on your farm like a servant. I can even sleep in the loft in the barn if you want.”

As you are still thinking about what you will say, you see someone running across the field toward you. It is

your father. You wonder if he is angry, ready to yell at you for even showing up.

But quickly you see his face. He has a huge smile. He embraces you. “How are you? I’ve been waiting, and I am so glad to see you,” he says. “I want to hear about anything that you want to share, but first let’s have a party. What do you most want to eat?”

As you walk toward the house, what will you share with him?

Children can be invited into imagining

gospel stories through being asked “wondering” questions. For example, after reading aloud the story a parent might ask, “I wonder what the son wanted to eat when he finally

got home” or “I wonder how the dad felt when he finally saw his son after a long time.” Allow children to explore answers without judgment; parents can learn something here, too. ■



Listen to God as a Family

What is God calling your family to do this Lent? Everyone in the family has a voice in discerning. If your parish has Lenten projects, perhaps bring a list of ideas to the table. Does the family want to donate socks to homeless veterans? Volunteer in some needed ministry at the church? Attend a parish retreat or talk together? Families might also choose to pray together at a regular time of day—for example, everyone can meet at breakfast and offer a few prayers for others in need. Or families might choose to place a prayer jar on the dining room table into which slips of paper can be placed anytime, with prayer intentions (smaller children can be invited to draw their intentions instead of writing them out). ■



Practice Mercy

Last year, I posted the corporal works of mercy on the refrigerator. They served as a reminder to me each day as to what kinds of actions especially matter



in our world, with its many needs and broken places. After a year in which I was grieving the death of a parent, I decided that this Lent I would be especially attentive to “bury the dead.” Although this can include attending funerals, I interpreted it more widely: whenever I learned that a friend, colleague, or acquaintance had experienced a loss and was grieving, I took time to write a card, make a phone call, or attend the wake or funeral, depending on the closeness of the relationship. I also promised to pray for the repose of the soul of the person who had died and to keep the grieving family in my prayers, and I followed through on praying. My own experience of grief

opened me up to the many experiences of grief among others around me. Practicing this work of mercy helped me grow in care for the wider community and also brought me some healing through recognizing common experiences.

Perhaps your family feels invited to pay special attention to a particular corporal or spiritual work of mercy. Does one especially resonate with your own past or present experience? Or is there one that has always been somewhat neglected that it is time to consider anew? Consider concrete and specific ways to practice this work of mercy this Lent. ■



Works of Mercy

The works of mercy are actions we can perform that extend God’s compassion and mercy to others.

The corporal works of mercy are the kind acts by which we help our neighbors with their material and physical needs. They include feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, and burying the dead.

The spiritual works of mercy help us tend to the emotional and spiritual needs of others. They include counseling the doubtful, instructing the ignorant, admonishing sinners, comforting the afflicted, forgiving offenses, bearing wrongs patiently, and praying for the living and the dead. ■

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Social Conversion

As human beings, we are not isolated individuals but members of a larger community. As we grow more connected to one another, we are increasingly realizing that we are part of larger social structures—structures that can help communities flourish, but also ones that are sinful. Racism, poverty, ecological crises, sexism, and many other problems call for social transformation. We can choose to undertake actions that help us change our own participation in larger social problems.

For example, families can practice “carbon fasting” as a response to climate change. Search for “my carbon footprint” on the web to find concrete ways to do this. Problems such as racism require heartfelt listening to others and a willingness to confront our own prejudices. Listening to others can be a valuable Lenten practice.

At the heart of all our Lenten practices is God’s gift of love that brings us to the great celebration of Easter joy. Saint Paul writes, “If I . . . do not have love, I am nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:2). No matter what specific practices we choose, may we remember that Lent is an invitation to grow in love of God and one another. ■

