

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

A Lent Well Spent

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Hi. My name is Elizabeth Ficocelli. I am a Catholic author, speaker, and radio host, and I welcome you to this presentation, “A Lent Well Spent.” Let’s start with a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord, we thank You for the season of Lent, for 40 days to walk with You in a closer and more meaningful way, that we may look into ourselves, into our souls, our spirits, to see the areas of change that You may be calling us to, so that we can rise with You to new life, new people, and help transform the world. And we ask this in Jesus’ name. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I love talking about the season of Lent. It’s come to mean a lot to me as a Catholic. But I did not start out Catholic. I was raised in a loosely-Lutheran formation. I say that because we didn’t practice our faith at home. And my only recollection of my Lutheran Lent were these little metal banks that we were given to bring home, and I’m sure the idea was we were supposed to do chores around the house and earn some money and bring that back to the church, which is a great little exercise. But for some reason, that never happened in my home. The 5 of us brought our banks home, they sat around the house, and the day before they were due we would bring them to our parents, they would bring out the big canister of pennies they used to have, and we would just cram our banks full of these pennies and bring them back. We had not earned them, and so it was kind of a going through the motions thing, and it was not a very impactful exercise, unfortunately, for us.

As I grew up I had girlfriends who were Catholic, and I noticed that they also celebrated Lent, but in a little bit different way. In a more profound way. First of all, I noticed that at the beginning of Lent they would get this little smudge on their forehead. I didn’t know much about it, but I knew it meant they were Catholic. But what really I can remember very vividly, are my Catholic girlfriends that would agonize for weeks prior to Lent saying “Okay, what am I going to give up? What am I going to give up?” And it would always be the same thing. It would come down to chocolate in one form or another. Chocolate ice cream, chocolate cake, chocolate cookies, chocolate candy. But it was always chocolate, which is a big

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thing to give up I have to say for teenage girls. And I just remember being very impressed because these girls would stick with their promises. They would really give these up for a long period of time. And I just came away from it thinking “Gee, they take Lent a little more seriously than we do in our church.”

Well, as a young adult in my twenties I became Catholic, and at my first Catholic Lent on Ash Wednesday I went with everybody else to receive that little black smudge on my forehead, which I found out was not a smudge. It was actually a cross that was being etched on my forehead. I didn't really understand the significance of the ashes though in the beginning. I didn't know that that was supposed to be an ancient symbol of penitence. That this was a season of penitence. I didn't understand it was a reminder of our mortality, you know, from the ashes we came and ashes we go. To me, it was just this outward sign that I had become Catholic, a pronouncement to the world. But I'll admit that, in the beginning, for my first couple of Lents I got those ashes at night, because I wasn't comfortable wearing them to the workplace. And so I wasn't quite that proud yet of being Catholic.

But more important than the ashes to me from that very first Lent is what was I was going to give up, because now it was my turn. And I did consider chocolate for about 4 and a half minutes, and decided I was not quite a committed Catholic enough to give up chocolate. That was a little too hard. But I did give up something else that I enjoyed on a daily basis, and that was coffee. So, you know, I drank a cup of coffee or two a day back then. So Lent came and I stopped drinking coffee, substituted it with hot water and lemon. But, you know, Easter Sunday rolls around and I'm the first in line at Dunkin Donuts getting my big gulp of coffee. So, you know, Lent came and went I was no different of a person. And I did that for a while.

And then one Lent I decided to do a variation on that, and instead of giving up coffee altogether, I switched during the 40 days of Lent to decaf coffee. And lo and behold, when Lent was over I never went back to regular coffee. And it showed me that I really could make a change in myself that would last beyond the season of Lent. Now, of course, coffee is not this deeply spiritual thing, right. But it was a habit I changed, it was a transformation, and that planted a really important seed for me. It would take a lot of Lents before I began to have an appreciation of what this season really is supposed to be for a Catholic. And, you know, that it's this period of 40 days leading up to Easter, our highest feast day on the Liturgical

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calendar, and that it's set aside as a time of self-examination. You know, this is an invitation for us to turn away from our sin, to be faithful to the gospel, it's a call to continual conversion and holiness, and it's an invitation and opportunity for us to move closer to Christ and to this way of life that He showed us when He lived 2000 years ago.

And it would be a while before I would grasp the traditional pillars of Lent as our church proposes. That's prayer, and that's fasting, and alms giving. In the beginning it was pretty surfacey efforts on my part, but I would say over the years I began to explore these at a deeper level with my family. So prayer, for instance, went from simply maybe grace around the table, or bedtime prayers with the kids to things like novenas, and Eucharistic adoration, you know, that kind of prayer, chaplets and the rosary. Fasting went from just fasting on Ash Wednesday and the Fridays during Lent to experimenting with fasting during different times of the year, and even fasting for days in a row, and I would begin to see the power of fasting. They say that's the most powerful form of prayer you can have, is fasting.

And then with alms giving, I began to experience – after a priest friend of ours lovingly invited us to tithe the full 10%, like it talks about in the bible – that we have the struggles, but then the joy of tithing more deeply and seeing the change not only in ourselves, but the change we were able to affect with that money for people and situations around us. And as I studied and experienced Lent, I began to understand that the bottom line goal of Lent was to come out to be a changed, truly transformed person, like the caterpillar turning into that butterfly. It never goes back to becoming a caterpillar again, right. It has changed for the rest of the life. But then, of course, that poses the question: How do we do that, you know, in concrete ways so that each Lent is going to be a true growth experience, year-after-year in our spiritual walks?

I don't know about you, but this happens to me so often. Lent will approach and I'll think "Okay, here it is. My 40 days. I'm going to really take advantage of this. I am really going to, you know, do all of these great choices, take on all of these new habits, I'm going to be a better person, I'm going to be holier." And Lent comes along and I find myself irritated so easily. I find myself having a lack of motivation. And I'm not in general a person who lacks motivation. I'm kind of one of those doers, almost to an excess. So where is this slothful lack of motivation coming from that all of a sudden kind of pops up at Lent? It just... it seems like I

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become less holy rather than more holy, and it's been so frustrating for so many years.

And a priest friend helped me to see that, you know, the season of Lent can magnify our sinful nature because that's the Holy Spirit working and showing us the areas that we need to change. That these are the areas God is asking us to address this particular year. That helped me to see that that was a grace. And so when we think about giving up something, way better than giving up chocolate is giving up sin. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Give up sin, because sin has such a powerful hold on our lives, and just blocks us from God's grace and what God wants to do with us. And so, you know, the wonderful gift that we have as Catholics, the way we can get rid of our sin and start again of course is the gift of reconciliation, or confession. And we can use that unlimitedly, right. We just keep going back and starting over, and getting that grace. So, we want to give up sin, that's the thing.

But, you know, this giving up mentality, I think so many Catholics have been raised with this. Just, it's so engrained in them. And many years ago, I remember reading an article where this man was talking about transforming or shifting his focus from this concept of giving up to what he called "Giving away and giving in." And giving away, he was meaning sharing the blessings and the time and the talent that he had with others; giving away something of himself. And then giving in meant yielding to others, and putting their needs ahead of his own. And I really like this concept of giving out and giving in. And so I started doing a little more research in that area. And my favorite giving out was something called "Susan Vogt's big giveaway".

And Susan Vogt is a Christian writer, and she was talking about, in her own protestant church, also being raised with that giving up mentality, and she wanted to try something different. And so she wanted to try, you know, giving out or giving away, and she decided this one particular Lent that every day of Lent, she was going to give something away. And so she started in her closet and she started giving away clothes, and she started giving away extra pairs of shoes that she didn't really wear. And she basically started going around her house, she found in the basement some old kitchen... old kitchen gadgets and appliances still in their boxes, and she found she had no lack, no shortage of things she could give away for the entire season of Lent.

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And she learned many lessons from this exercise. She, first of all, learned to be a more generous and more caring person, you know, really others-focused. She learned to recognize and strip away the non-essentials of her life and to see how many non-essentials she had surrounded herself with through the years. It caused her to reflect on her purchases. Before she bought something now to bring home, she wanted to really reflect on “Do I need this? Is this something I really need, or is this just a frivolous purchase in the moment?” It helped her develop an attitude of gratitude for what she had instead of focusing on her lack, which I think is so easy for us to do, and to remember the painful lesson, the true lesson: You can’t take it with you anyway, right. You never see, as they say, a hearse pulling a U-Haul, you know, vehicle behind it, you know. You can’t take this material stuff with us, so why not share what we have with others?

And I thought this was a great idea, and I took it one step further and made it a family event. And I thought “This is a great idea. We could, as a family, go around the house and find things to give away all through the 40 days of Lent.” And you can do this with your own family, and maybe you want to tackle one part of your home, you know, that garage, that basement, that playroom, you know, that area you’ve been meaning to get to, or maybe it’s house-wide. And either you give away the things on a daily basis, or you collect them somewhere, and then as a family bring them to a homeless shelter or another place where other people can use our blessings. So I really, really like this idea of giving away, or giving out.

And then the concept of giving in also intrigued me, and I found a wonderful article by Creighton University, and it was written, actually, looking at our marriage relationships during the season of Lent. But I think the concepts in the article are applicable to all of our relationships with the key people in our lives, whether it’s parental relationships, our spousal relationships, our sibling relationships, coworkers, friends. But basically, the article was talking about, you know, asking us “Are we loving other people fully and unconditionally? Those people that God has entrusted us with? You know, are we putting their needs ahead of our own? And do we even know the needs of the people that live with us? You know, or have we become so self-centered and myopic and are ignorant of this?” And the article was saying that when we love another person unconditionally and fully, that it has this transforming effect on us and those around us. Now, of course we can’t just set out and do this on our own. We really have to ask God daily for

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the graces to do this. We have to ask God. “Please, work through us. Love through us to love other people, and help us to put their needs first.”

And so the article, the other thing I love about this article, is that it gave... it wasn't just ethereally “Well, love people unconditionally.” And what does that mean? Well, it gave a list of specific things you can do in the way you behave in your relationships, and boy could I relate to a lot of this list, and maybe you can too. But it challenged you to refrain from sarcastic comments and cutting remarks, to resist the urge to correct all the time, to stop pouting, and to stop manipulating, stop giving a cold shoulder, catching ourselves when we complain, and stop keeping score. And these are relationship faux pas that I think all of us can relate to at one time or another, but really concrete ways that we can challenge ourselves to love more fully, more unconditionally.

And maybe, you know, and you're thinking “Gee, putting someone else's needs ahead of my own sounds so unappealing”, right, because we're all about preserving ourselves. We're just self-centered. I mean, that's just our nature. But consider the words of St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta. She said, “When you put Jesus first, others second, and yourself last, those first three letters – Jesus, Others, Yourself – are J-O-Y, and that spells joy.” We will be joyful and happier when we live the way God calls us to live. When we put others first, we ultimately will find more happiness in ourselves. The world has this concept completely backwards. That's why the world is miserable, and most people in the world are miserable. But by putting things in their proper perspective – Jesus, Others, Yourself – we will ultimately find happiness, and it will ultimately transform the relationships we have.

Lent is a period of time, right, it's that 40 days. This is a great thing about Lent, because as we're embarking on finding areas in our life we need to make changes in and actually trying to make those changes, Lent gives us a period of time where we can effect new habits, new ways of living and being. And I think it was Stephen Covey in *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People* that said, “It takes 21 days to form a habit.” You have to do something 21 days in a row before it will become habitual. I've read other sources that say 66 days, you know, can really help form a habit. Well, Lent is 40 days. I think that's a perfect balance right there. And so it gives us enough time to practice these new habits, habits that we can practice not just at Lent, but all year long as well.

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And another great example of using this 40-day time period is something called the Love Dare. And it came out of a movie called *Fireproof*. Maybe you've seen the movie. If you haven't, I would definitely encourage you. It's a great movie to watch at Lent. But, essentially, it's a story of a firefighter whose marriage is going up in smoke, because the firefighter has made some dumb choices and has not been nurturing his marriage. And his father encourages him and convinced him to take this thing called the Love Dare, and it's basically doing acts of kindness, giving of himself for 40 days in a row. And at first, the firefighter is reluctant, and he's kind of going through the motions. Well, what happens is he doesn't have a change of heart, and no change happens in his marriage. He even wants to quit midstream. But the father convinces him to stay in there, and finally in time he begins to experience true, genuine transformation in himself. And what happens? The marriage is transformed as well. And, so the makers of *Fireproof* have come out with what they call a Love Dare journal that you can get it, you know, online, and it's basically a way to form a new habit of daily love, and I think it's a great way that we can make use of Lent.

And, you know, in the beginning of my Catholicism, my Lent was a very personal experience. It was me and God, right. But as I have become a family member, you know, a spouse, and children, and watch people live together and grow together, it's occurred to me how much more valuable a Lent is when we do it as a family. When we become something, you know, bigger. Obviously we do it as our church family, but when we do it with the people that we live with, it can really become powerful and enhance our success of living up to those Lenten promises we make, and making those lasting changes in ourselves, because we have accountability, and we have people around us who are going to help us stay on our path.

And the idea really started when one of our children was in kindergarten, and he brought home a purple heart cut out of construction paper. And the teacher had written, "This Lent, I promise to..." and then our son wrote his promise and he signed his name. And I thought, "Oh, I think all of us should do this." And so I made, you know, purple hearts for everybody else in the family, we all wrote on it "This Lent, I promise to..." We wrote down our promise, we signed it. And then I hung them in the kitchen on the windows all around our kitchen table, where we gathered the most, and it was a way to remind ourselves "That's my promise up there on the wall", and to help each other remember their promises when sometimes they forgot and kind of fell off the wagon, and I really saw an

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accountability thing happen. It was a really positive experience, and good for our family too.

And then from that evolved our Lenten poster. We brainstormed, as the kids got a little older, things that we could do during the season of Lent as a family, and we put them on a big list, and they included things like praying the Rosary or the Chaplet as a family, going to Eucharistic adoration, watching a spiritual movie, reading scripture, you know, again as a family, attending a Bible study or a talk, visiting someone in a hospital or a nursing home, praying outside an abortion clinic, sending spiritual material to prisons, writing a letter to a child that we adopted from another country, serving at a food pantry, making a pilgrimage as a family, doing the Stations of the Cross, going to daily mass, confession, fasting. All of these kinds of things. And every time we would do one of the things on our poster, the kids would get to put a gold star next to it. And we had people come to our home and see this poster in our kitchen and say, "That's a really great idea. I'm going to do that for my own family." And so, yeah, we still do it, and it's a great way to remember that you're in the season of Lent, and a good way to keep progress of things we're doing as a family during these 40 days.

And then one other tip I'll put out there for a good way to find a way to transform ourselves during Lent and keep ourselves on track is a challenge to listen to Catholic Radio every day during the season. And if you have Catholic Radio in your immediate area you can just find it on your radio dial, and keep that dial there, you know, all through the season. Every time you get in the car just listen to Catholic Radio. Sometimes, if you don't have Catholic Radio in your city, you can get it on an app on your phone and listen to it that way. But you'll... I can promise if you listen to Catholic Radio on a daily basis for the season of Lent, you will be so surprised at how much you learn about Catholicism, and how deeper your walk with Christ will be at the end of it. And it will absolute transform you, and I promise you won't want to go back to that favorite music station or talk radio station. You'll become a Catholic Radio junkie. It happens to all of us.

And I want to end with my 4 kind of tips sort of to wrap this talk up. And the tips are the letters of Lent L-E-N-T. And L is for: Live up to your promises. Don't be afraid to be bold with making some promises that are going to push you this Lent. Don't be unrealistic, but, you know, don't be afraid to push yourself a little bit, and pray for the fortitude to carry out these Lenten promises this year. So live up to your promises. E is: Engage. Engage now if you haven't yet. Maybe Lent is

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already under way and you haven't really decided anything you're give up, away, give in, whatever. Start now. A partial Lent is better than no Lent at all. N: Never be discouraged. If we fall away from our promises, if we forget, or if we mess up, that's just human nature. You can always start again. That's the beauty. Just pick yourself up, start with new determination. And then T: Take God with you this Lent. Maybe before we rush off on all of these changes we're going to make, why don't we pray first and ask God to help us. Ask the Holy Spirit to show us "What changes does He want us to make this Lent that are going to be the most beneficial for ourselves and for our loved ones?" And then, of course, ask for the grace to carry it out, because we just need God's grace to do that. We can't do it on our own.

So those are my tips. And I hope that this presentation has given you some ideas on how to make your Lent well spent. So I will keep you in my prayers this Lent. I hope you will keep me in yours as well. And let's conclude with a prayer.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord, You gave us these 40 days of Lent for a reason. Open our hearts and minds, and show us the areas that You're calling us most specifically to change. Surround us with resources, and people, and all of Your graces, Your sacraments, so that we can walk this journey with You, grow closer to You, and we can come out of this season as truly transformed people, stronger than ever, ready to face a new year as a Christian disciple. We ask this all in the name of Jesus. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Thank you. God bless. Happy Lent.