

Lenten

Reflection Guide

2016

Spending forty days with the four pillars of faith-based service:
Spirituality, Social Justice,
Simple Living, and Community

A resource brought to you by:



About this Resource:

This Lenten season, we invite you to rekindle your commitment to service by spending these forty days with the four pillars of faith-based service. This Lenten Reflection Guide is a collection of reflections and prayers written by current and former volunteers, each one sharing how the experience of full-time service has helped them to see the story of Christ's death and resurrection in a new light. We are thankful for the opportunity to journey together during this Lenten season. May God speak to you through the pages of this Lenten Reflection Guide!

The Four Pillars of Faith-Based Service

Social Justice: We believe that social justice is a way of seeing the world through the lens of the Gospel. Jesus prompts us to ask questions about the root causes of poverty, injustice, and inequality in our world. We are called to be a source of light for our communities as we seek to promote justice for all. CVN volunteers are committed to standing with the poor and being agents of positive change.

Community: The service experience can be intense. It's something that many of us would not be able to do on our own, which is why volunteers live in community. Volunteer communities share meals and household responsibilities, commit to making decisions collaboratively, and support one another through shared prayer. This emphasis on community helps enrich and deepen the service experience in many ways.

Spirituality: Many volunteers cite their faith as one of the primary motivations for their commitment to service. As volunteers, we have the opportunity to deepen our faith in many ways including regular spirituality nights within volunteer communities, several retreats throughout the year, and opportunities for personal prayer and reflection.

Simple Living: A small living stipend encourages volunteers to become more mindful of their consumption and the ways they choose to spend their money. Shared meals help volunteers reflect more deeply on the impact of their food choices and the benefits to finding local sources for their meals. As the service year goes on, many volunteers find themselves refining what it means to live simply.

About Us:



The Catholic Apostolate Center, a ministry of the Society of the Catholic Apostolate (Pallottines) - Immaculate Conception Province, was founded in 2011 to respond to the needs of the Church through: Developing, in collaboration with dioceses and other institutions and organizations, formation programs for the New Evangelization; Assisting Catholic leaders in deepening collaboration with one another; Providing formation and apostolic opportunities for members and collaborators of the Union of Catholic Apostolate. The Center takes its inspiration from the spirituality of St. Vincent Pallotti and achieves its goals through hosting conferences, seminars, webinars, and presentations as well as providing online and print resources. *For more information visit: www.catholicapostolatecenter.org*



Catholic Volunteer Network is a national membership organization of Christian volunteer and mission programs that fosters and promotes full-time national and international service opportunities for people of all backgrounds, ages and skills. Catholic Volunteer Network supports and enhances the work of its membership by providing training and resources, networking opportunities, and national advocacy. *For more information visit: www.catholicvolunteernetwork.org*

For additional Lenten resources, please visit Catholic Apostolate Center's resources page:
www.catholicapostolatecenter.org/lenten-resources.html

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

“When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.”

Threads of Prayer and Justice

Prayer and justice go together. This is the theme that we find Jesus teaching in our Ash Wednesday scripture. It stems from a long tradition of the liberating God of the Exodus who calls people to lives of both prayer and justice. This prominent thread weaves its way through Judeo-Christian history and emerges in the prophetic outcries of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Isaiah exemplifies this prophetic conviction about prayer and justice:

Is this the manner of fasting I would choose, a day to afflict oneself? ... Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh? (Is. 58:5-7)

If you look carefully, you might notice that the lectionary omits a section right in the middle of today’s Gospel reading. What do you find between verses 6 and 16? That’s right, the Lord’s Prayer! The Our Father! Jesus is teaching his followers to pray about very specific acts similar to Isaiah: Daily bread: making sure all have enough to eat! Debts: unbinding the enslaved! Temptation: refusing the temptation to use violent tactics to bring about the Kingdom of God, rather, committing to nonviolence! In essence, the Our Father is a call to justice wrapped up in prayer. I believe that is the call of Ash Wednesday. That, as both the prophets and Jesus taught, our attempts at prayer be wrapped up in justice and that our just acts may be wrapped up in prayer.

Service in Secret

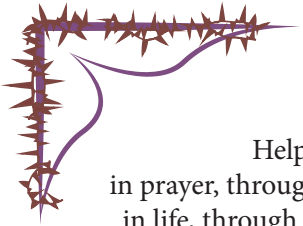
Praise can be a wonderful—or difficult—expression to accept. It feels nice to be appreciated, noticed, and needed...but it can feel even better to give and not receive. When it’s your faith that drives your actions, your works will be authentic and you will find the intrinsic motivation to dig deeper and to serve more secretly. When your actions are controlled by righteous deeds that beg for attention, you will soon lose sight of how (and who) you are being called serve.

I’m sure my community members can attest: While living in an intentional community with 17 others, it is difficult to do anything in private. Someone is in the family room while you’re making a phone call; somebody else is in the bathroom while you’re trying to take a shower...the only time during the day that you’re not surrounded by the community is when you are in your classroom—and even then, you are encircled by your students! Although it is nice to be surrounded by loving individuals, you may feel that your actions (and inactions) never go unnoticed.

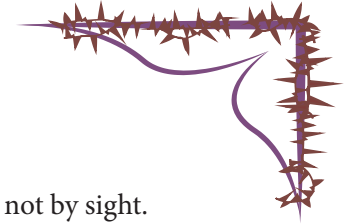
In the midst of busy, demanding schedules and community expectations, it’s important to reflect on how you spend your time—and how you can restructure your time to make more room for humble service and heartfelt prayer. It may be as simple as waking up a few minutes early to sneak into the kitchen and make the morning coffee, or cleaning the snow off of your neighbor’s windshield. It may involve putting down your phone before bed and saying an extra prayer for those who are experiencing difficulty in their lives. There’s something about making God’s love felt and not seeking the praise for your own gain that makes such endeavors warm and worthwhile.

Reflection by Dannis Matteson
Sisters of St Joseph of Rochester
Volunteer Corps Alumna

Reflection by Caitlin Wolford,
Urban Catholic Teacher Corps of
Boston College



Prayer



God of Justice,
 Help me to follow Your call
 in prayer, through listening to Your still, small voice
 in life, through listening to the needs of the world
 in silence, through listening to my own heart's desires
 Lead me to the joy of answering your call
 over and over again.
 Amen.

Heavenly Father,
 Guide me as I walk by faith and not by sight.
 Allow me to trust in You in moments when I step out
 of my comfort zone to faithfully serve You and live in sol-
 idarity with Your people. For in this moment, I know no
 reward that could ever compare to the everlasting reward
 that is your kingdom in heaven. Help me to hear Your call
 and do Your will.
 Amen.

Spirituality

Responding to God's call to us is key to cultivating a lifestyle of prayer and justice. Remember that the passion and desire that emerges within you often indicates the direction in which God is calling you. The call of prayer and justice often leads to hardship and challenge. But ultimately, it leads to deep joy. Spend time this Lenten season journaling about ways that you feel called to embody a lifestyle of prayer and justice today, this year, and in the future.

Focus on:

Social Justice

As part of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, what better opportunity to intentionally show others the mercy of God than during the Lenten season? Even more so, challenge yourself to live out a message of mercy in secret. Delve deeper into these works at USCCB Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Service Suggestion:

As a CVN Volunteer, you serve every day! Perhaps you might spend time this Lent contemplating how you will continue your lifestyle of service once your volunteering concludes. As an example, both my husband and I participated in CVN years ago. And, we have continued living out service by answering the call to help start an intentional community called the Hope House that serves Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood through The Port Ministries. Our Hope House community is committed to communal prayer, as well as practical justice in a variety of ways. As we have found, when you follow God's call, anything is possible!

Service Suggestion:

Humble thyself to secretly serve. Complete random acts of kindness in your intentional or greater community. Become involved in at least one Spiritual and Corporal Work of Mercy and truly dedicate yourself to it—while no one is watching.

First Sunday

Luke 4:1-13

“You shall not put the Lord, Your God to the test.”

Finding Strength in Weakness

One of my favorite places to go during this mission year is Regina House, a retirement home for religious sisters. Regina House is so special to me because it feels like going to grandma’s house, except there are a hundred loving grandmas, all consecrated to God. When I’m there, it’s easy to give and receive their love.

What makes the Sisters so easy to love? I think it has to do with their surrender and weakness. At this stage in their lives, the retired Sisters have surrendered the care of many physical needs. These strong women spent their lives caring for others and now allow others to care for them. I’m sure that’s not easy. I know I sure do fight my weaknesses. And I think that makes me hard to love sometimes. When I was little I was easier to love. I was honest about my needs; I asked for help. I knew I needed love, so I would snuggle with my parents, unashamed. The truth is that the weakest among us are easier to love, because they claim their weaknesses, they don’t fight help.

In this week’s Gospel, Jesus intentionally makes Himself physically weak. He chooses harsh conditions; the desert and fasting from food and water for forty whole days. Think about how thirsty you’d be after forty days?

What is Jesus trying to tell us about weakness? I think he’s setting an example. Jesus wants us to know that it is our weaknesses, not our strengths that invite His love and care into our lives. I think He’s saying “If only you could see how beautiful your weaknesses are to me,

Reflection by Monica Patti,
St. Joseph Worker Program in
Orange, California

you would give them to me wholeheartedly. I long to love you through your weaknesses, will you let me?”

Prayer

Dear Jesus,

You embraced Your weaknesses in the desert but You never struggled alone. Please show me how I can depend, as You did, on the Father for strength. Please show me how I can claim my weakness and offer them to You. Please grant me the graces necessary to open up to You in prayer about my struggles. Please teach me to reach out my hand to grasp yours, so that You can accompany me during my times of struggle. Please show me who I can talk to about my weaknesses, so that I journey with the strength You provide through community.

Amen.

Focus on:

Spirituality

In order to grow spiritually and connect within our communities, we need to be able to talk about our weaknesses. Weaknesses are all the things we deem imperfections: our flaws, our struggles, even our sins. Jesus wants them all. It’s scary to tell someone your deepest weaknesses. But we need to. Hiding our weaknesses isolates us. Don’t forget that Jesus was never alone in the desert! His Father was with Him. And Jesus doesn’t want us to be alone either. How can you begin to talk and pray about your weaknesses? Could you journal about them to Jesus? Could you find a trusted friend, priest, or counselor? Start small, just write it down and give it to Jesus, ask for the grace to keep being open.

Service Suggestion:

Visit the elderly, especially those who dedicated their lives to service, such as vets, retirement communities for religious, or anyone living in a retirement community or nursing home. Be a listening ear to those who are alone and isolated by age or disability, they just might listen to you as well.

Second Sunday

Luke 9:28b-36

“This is my chosen Son; Listen to him.”

Finding my Mission

Mission, witness, and identity are three overarching themes that can be taken from this text. It is important to note that what precedes this section of text is Jesus talking to his disciples about his upcoming death and resurrection, and the need for believers to take up their cross and follow him. After he gave this impassioned sermon, he retreated to a mountain to pray and took with him three of his closest disciples. What happened next would not have been believed by anyone had there not been witnesses to later testify to the event. Through prayer, God bears witness to Jesus’ redemptive mission on earth. Even the face of Jesus changed and his clothes became dazzling white. In the story of Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:21-22) God testifies concerning Jesus’ identity; Jesus is a beloved son, the chosen one.

All of my life I have struggled finding my mission. I have looked for an exact calling, a voice from God, a dove, or at least a cloud of witnesses to tell me that I am on the right path. Deciding who I am and what I stand for in the face of so many competing messages from society is not an easy task and I sometimes find myself getting discouraged about my own lack of clarity about what I am called to do. What helps me in these moments of doubt is to take some time and earnestly pray to God for His wisdom and guidance.

Reflection by Sarah Raven,
Good Shepherd Volunteers

Remember Who You Are

“Remember who you are.” It’s my grandpa’s favorite catchphrase to use when I’m leaving family gatherings. He says it while gripping my hand and looking me straight in the eye. His stare reminds me that when I go out into the world, I bring my family’s reputation and love along with me. It’s a nice thing for a grandpa to say, but in the context of this Gospel story my grandpa’s advice takes on a greater meaning. Luke paints a picture of the Divine breaking into the everyday and blinding us with the truth that our primary identity that we carry into the world is that we are God’s beloved daughters and sons, and our destiny is eternal glory.

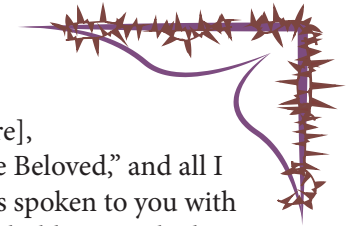
Often we choose to reject our belovedness and choose to identify only as broken and incapable of repair. Lent usually exacerbates this feeling, but this penitential season does not have to be a time for self-rejection. We are not so broken that the mercy and love of God cannot fix us. In fact, this mid-Lent Gospel reminds me that despite our brokenness, God still has our glory in mind.

Let us use the remainder of Lent to remember who we really are. We are not children of the world or people without a future. We are chosen, beloved daughters and sons of God, and it is our joyful task to open ourselves to God’s transforming love so that we might appear in glory with Him at the end of time.

Reflection by Tom Carani,
ECHO Program



Prayer



Lord,
 We thank you and praise you on this Transfiguration Sunday for your gifts of mission, identity, and purpose. Grant that we remember to seek your guidance as we bear witness to your transformational love.
 Amen.

[Insert your name here],
 All I want to say to you is “You are the Beloved,” and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being—“You are the Beloved.” (Life of the Beloved, Henri Nouwen)
 Lord, I give your Spirit permission to enter into my wounds and isolation with the healing light of Jesus’ Transfiguration. May His light illumine the deepest truth of my identity: that I am a beloved child of God.
 Amen.

Simple Living

Simplicity is the most difficult pillar for me. I love my cell phone and I hardly go a day without access to social media, my tablet, and computer. However, simple living is not just about taking breaks from technology, or living on a stipend, it is also about freeing your mind and being present to the moment without clouding your thoughts with budgets, agendas, or what should happen next. Sometimes God tries to bring transformations into our lives and we miss it entirely. Peter saw Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah and his first thought was to build sukkot (or temporary dwellings) for the three, the text tells us he had no idea what he was really saying because he was caught up in day to day concerns.

Focus on:

Spirituality

We’re so comfortable hiding behind our brokenness that it is difficult to believe God loves us unconditionally and destines us for greatness. Like Peter, we stand gawking at other holy people when God’s plan for us is to follow Jesus and become holy ourselves. The path to holiness is difficult and requires that we expose our wounds to our Father so He can bathe them in His love and transform them. This Lent, consecrate your weaknesses to God so that He might make them the cause of your glory.

Service Suggestion:

Talk to someone you serve or a co-worker about their mission. What do they feel called to do and what are the steps they need to take to get/stay on that path? Ask them how you can assist them in their mission whether it is looking over their resume, being a reference, or simply providing a listening ear.

Service Suggestion:

Whether the idea of being God’s beloved is easy for you to grasp or not, it’s a message the world needs to hear. Uniquely and authentically communicate your love for another person today. Write your spouse a letter reminding him/her why you love him/her and what it is you love about him/her. Do a great act of service for that friend who listens to your griping and complaining. Perform some action today in order to show others that they, too, are the beloved.

Third Sunday

Luke 13:1-9

“But I tell you if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Prayer

Ever merciful and loving God,

You always see my full potential, even when I can't. May I always trust in the grand design You have for me. As I place my utmost trust in You, I leave my expectations and my timelines at Your holy feet, especially when I find it most difficult. Lord I thank You for entrusting me with being an instrument of Your unending love and compassion. As I always seek to emulate Your patience and compassion, let me come to Your people with no agendas but Your own.
Amen.

Lessons from the Fig Tree

Today's Gospel is one of the more applicable parables for those volunteering. The parable calls to mind one of my most difficult clients during my year as a St. Joseph Worker. He could have easily been the barren fig tree, just as easily as I could've been the man eager to cut down that tree. At every turn we were met with what seemed like insurmountable barriers to achieving stable housing. There were so many times I became disappointed, frustrated, and eager to throw in the towel.

It took me what seems like an impossible amount of time to learn and apply the true meaning of today's Gospel. When Jesus was telling the parable he made it clear that fruit takes time, tilling, and tending. Or in case management terms: patience, cultivation, and compassion. I was never there to judge; I was there to walk with my client and give him the tools necessary to find his own version of success, on his own terms.

In the end, my client wasn't anywhere near my original expectations. Rather he enjoyed more success than I could ever have imagined possible. God has a much better view from where He is. He can see the whole picture where we can't. He knows what each of us is fully capable of and what works is being done behind the scenes. As we continue to serve others both in our volunteer year and beyond, let us remember to trust in God's mighty and wondrous plans.

Focus on:

Community

In this Gospel, God is asking us for patience, compassion and understanding with those around us. While this lesson can certainly be applied to our daily ministries, it is often more difficult to extend that grace to those closest to us. What expectations (good or bad) do you bring to your community? Are any of these expectations affecting your relationships with those around you? Do you see yourself giving up on others or yourself when you do not meet these expectations? If you feel comfortable, these questions may be a great discussion starter among your community.

Service Suggestion:

The fig tree can be a very real representation of how today's society values certain people. Society is quick to dismiss and give-up on those who are experiencing homelessness, facing addictions, have been incarcerated, among other experiences. How is God calling you to protect and cultivate our brothers and sisters in Christ? How is God calling you to stand up for those who are deemed barren and unfruitful? Consider smaller actions such as talking to a person you pass on the streets that is experiencing homelessness or writing a letter to a person who is incarcerated.

Reflection by Kristen Daniels,
St. Joseph Worker Program Almuna

Fourth Sunday

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

“My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours.”

Stepping into the Shoes of the Prodigal Son

The beauty of parables is that they provide relevance regardless of who we are or the time period we inhabit. Now, I will concede that not every person can relate to the specifics. For instance, I've never been a farm hand, had servants, or even had a brother for that matter. What I, and we all, can do is resonant with the overarching messages Jesus is trying to convey. These stand the test of time.

I look back on my volunteer experience and strongly connect with one theme from this parable in particular; the swallowing of one's pride and the subsequent admission of, “I need help.” Avoidance of appearing vulnerable mixed with a pinch of arrogance, yes, but a heavy helping of economic privilege allowed me the benefit of avoiding these words the majority of my life. Most times I used this phrasing it was primarily out of laziness than necessity. It wasn't until I was living in simplicity that I had no choice but to seek help. More help than even I care to admit. This is not to say in any way I fully understand the plight of those facing economic hardships daily because I had a “drive by” experience in poverty. It's just to recognize the brief glimpse I had into the level of humility and vulnerability that comes with truly seeking help.

Most importantly, this moment serves as a reminder to me to have the unwavering, celebratory love of the father, for we all have been the Prodigal Son at some point.

The Father's Infinite Mercy

This Sunday's Gospel reading recounts for us the parable of the Prodigal Son. The importance of the message in this parable while we are in the midst of celebrating the Jubilee of Mercy cannot be discounted. The younger son understands that he has made many mistakes and is now destitute because he squandered the inheritance of his father. Now, he seeks forgiveness from his father, and when he returns home he says: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.” He has swallowed his pride and pleaded for forgiveness for making these mistakes.

If I was the father in this story, I would be upset over my son wasting the gifts I had given him. But what does the father do? He does not get even momentarily upset. Instead, he rejoices: “Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.” Through this parable, Christ is explaining to us the merciful side of God the Father. Even if we squander the gifts that God the Father gives us, He celebrates the return of those lost by welcoming them back into his embrace.

Throughout this Year of Mercy as we reflect upon how we can be an example of God's infinite mercy to others, consider how you can be the father in the parable to someone who seeks God's love and mercy. Celebrate their return to God and be the physical manifestation of that joy.

Reflection by Ben Neville,
Capuchin Franciscan Volunteer
Corps Midwest, Alumnus

Reflection by Jonathan Sitko,
Catholic Apostolate Center Staff

Prayer

Dear Lord,

Grant me the wisdom to understand the eyes I view my life with are not the same eyes that view my life. Make me mindful of the ripples I create as I enter the water to not make assumptions even if they come with the best of intentions. Give me the empathy and strength necessary to do your work, to not only help but celebrate my brothers and sisters in need, like the father celebrates the return of his son.

Amen.

God of infinite mercy and love,

Provide me the wisdom and compassion to embrace and love all, the way You embrace and love me. Provide me the strength to be a vessel of your forgiveness to those that may have harmed me and others, but that are truly seeking your love and kindness. And as I enter the final weeks of Lent, help me understand how to celebrate your Resurrection with others, and not waste my own gifts that You have given me. Provide me the compassion to celebrate those that seek to be with You again.

Amen.

Spirituality

Lectio Divina (Latin for “Divine Reading”) is the method for exploring scripture in less traditional manner. Rather than an analytical approach, the reader tries to actively enter the story to better understand Christ. The four steps are read, meditate, pray, and contemplate.

In the spirit of Lectio Divina, try to look at today’s reading several times through various lenses. Consider the perspective of the prodigal son, the father, the jealous son, the servants, and any other character present of your choosing. What sort of emotions come up as you contemplate each role, and can you relate to their point-of-view? Now apply it to your life, examine the relationships you have in your community with fellow volunteers, the people you serve, and the people that serve you in this same light. What might your volunteer experience look like through their eyes?

Service Suggestion:

It is a cliché, but simply give the gift of time to these individuals. Listen to their stories. Sit quietly and engaged nonverbally with those who can’t communicate using their words. Most importantly, laugh and have fun. I promise you will go in with the mentality of “I am here to help” and will leave with the feeling of “I think they helped me more than anything.”

Focus on:

Spirituality

Write a list of the people in your life that you would want to see after a long absence from them. It should include people that you would consider family, or hopefully actual family, which would make you sad if you have not spoken to them in one month or more. Pray for them this week, and thank God for bringing them into your lives. Pray for God to protect them and keep them safe. Like the father in his relationship to his son in the parable, these people are those who matter most to you. Take the time to thank God for blessing you with these people.

Service Suggestion:

The message of this passage for me is to hear the stories of people, and to share with others the gifts God has given to us. A great place for such sharing of human-to-human moments would be volunteering at a soup kitchen or shelter. Simply listening to a person’s story with an open heart can make the difference between a good and bad day in their lives. You then serve as the face of God’s compassion, and can provide a moment of empathy that sometimes is lacking. It also serves as a place for you to offer your skills, whether they be listening, serving, organization, etc. This serves as a small reminder of the need to give to others what God has given us.

Fourth Sunday

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

“My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours.”

Am I the Older Brother?

When we consider the parable of the Prodigal Son, we often ponder just that: the Prodigal Son. But what about the two other characters, the good Father and the older brother?

I am the older brother. Not having had a radical conversion, I identify with the older brother who stayed on his Father’s land his whole life, but maybe never appreciated it. The older brother is bitter and angry when the younger son returns after his life of debauchery away from the Father’s house. How come he is welcomed back so quickly? I’ve put in so much effort and received no reward!

The older brother wanted to leave the house many times, but didn’t. We may not have physically left the Father’s house, but what about in our hearts? I left through pride, bitterness, and grumbling about the benefits I’d have if I did leave. And now the younger son who has done what I always wanted to do, returns. How could I welcome him back? He, who got a taste of the outside world and returned without consequences?

As a Christ in the City missionary, I work with the homeless everyday. I go out to the street to meet and talk with people who are normally ignored. I meet people who are broken, ashamed, and want so badly to return to the Father’s house. They have left and now “feel the pinch” as the Gospel says. How do I welcome them back? Am I the older brother who refuses to welcome them? Have I realized the gift that it is to be in the Father’s house?

Reflection by Makena Clawson,
Christ in the City

Prayer

Dear Lord,

You call all of us back to Your house. I have strayed in big ways and in small ways. Please welcome me back. I know Your mercy is bigger than my pride. Help me to not be afraid to run back to You every time I stray.

Lord, help me to welcome back those who have left your house. Help me to not hold any bitterness against them or You. Please give me a humble heart to realize I have left You many times, too. Please forgive me. I love You, Lord. Amen.

Focus on:

Simple Living

The younger brother left his Father’s house to spend all of the inheritance. Am I intentional about how I spend my money? Do I waste the valuable resources God has given me? Think of one expense you can do without this week, maybe coffee out, a trip to the mall, or dining out.

Service Suggestion:

Overcome the pride of the older brother by serving and welcoming others different from yourself. Try serving the homeless at a local shelter or soup kitchen. After you have served, go around and meet the patrons, asking their name and having a conversation to get to know them. (This is the most important part!)

Fifth Sunday

John 8:1-11

“Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

Dropping the Stones

Back in the days of high school drama and cafeteria gossip, I remember hearing of a classmate who had supposedly cheated on his girlfriend. My friends and I, of course, had to discuss it, dissect it, debate it. “It’s so wrong!” I recall declaring. “I’d break up with him.” Back then, and for a long time, my world was full of moral absolutes: black or white, right or wrong, yes or no.

This memory, and my attitude at the time, is what first came to mind when reading today’s Gospel. I would have fit right in with the crowd, trying to persuade Jesus that the adulterous woman had clearly sinned. I can picture my teenage self, hand on my hip and a challenge in my voice: “Now what do you have to say, Jesus?”

Of course, Jesus is a step ahead of the crowds and me. He asks us to move beyond our moral absolutes, our hasty judgments, and our hardened hearts. He quietly suggests turning our gaze inward, and considering all the times we ourselves have fallen short, tripped up, did something wrong. “Who here has never made a mistake?” is what we hear from Jesus, and our indignation disappears in an instant. We drop the stones from our hands, and contemplate forgiveness instead.

Look Again

For the first time in reading this passage, I was disappointed. It is one of the most famous passages of the entire Bible; everybody knows the line “He who has never sinned shall cast the first stone.” What a line for the world to know about Christianity! What was Jesus telling us? It sounds like he was saying that the woman’s life was valued to the extent of everyone else’s depravity. It sounds like he was saying that we should not hold others accountable for their misdeeds. It sounds like he was saying that pure morality grants the privilege to kill.

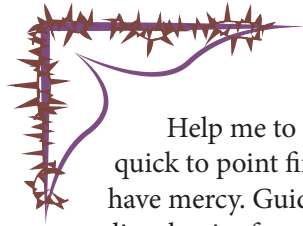
Perhaps that is what Jesus said in order to calm a rowdy crowd, in order to save a life. However, we are not a rowdy crowd. We are volunteers who want to nurture life through our service. What would Jesus say to us today if we presented to Him a neighbor who had done wrong?

He would say that this person is a treasure. He would say that, even though the wrongdoing is so noticeable, the person’s hidden goodness far exceeds the bad. We would be doing ourselves a disservice by ridding our community of such potential for excellence.

When I reread this passage, I see everything that is hidden: the woman’s hidden goodness and Jesus’ hidden message. It has taught me something very quiet but very powerful: it says look again.

Reflection by Sarah Ceponis,
Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry
Alumna

Reflection by Anna Dourgarian,
Visitation Internship Program

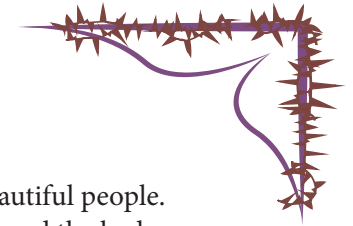


Forgiving God,

Help me to remember that though we live in a world quick to point fingers, to blame, to condemn, I can choose to have mercy. Guide me to step away from the crowd, and to realize that it often takes more strength to simply let a stone drop, than to throw it. Give me the courage to go against the grain, and always find a way to forgive.

Amen.

Prayer



Ours is a stunning world with beautiful people.
We are all a balance of the good and the bad,
and we have the power to strive for more good.
I accept responsibility for encouraging more good.
I love this world, and I commit to treating it with love.
I give thanks for it. I hold it as precious to my heart.

Amen.

Social Justice

In working for a few years with men recently released from incarceration, I was thrust into a much deeper understanding of this Gospel. As friendships formed with these men, and their stories began to unfold, I found my “black and white, right and wrong” grasp on the world begin to fade away. The true meaning of social justice came alive in listening and learning about their pasts, drug deals and carjackings and robberies and all. I realized that criminal justice lets mistakes define a man, but social justice lets mercy do the defining. Justice can just as easily mean punishment, or forgiveness. Jesus makes clear, in this Gospel, which definition we should adopt.

Focus on:

Community

Making judgments is a natural and powerful function of the human brain, but it is important to acknowledge that sometimes our judgments are wrong or outdated. Take this Lenten season to recognize and reassess judgments you have made of your loved ones and not-so-loved ones. Remember to reassess the judgments you have made about yourself, too.

Service suggestion:

If you would like to more deeply consider forgiveness this Lenten season, I suggest reading Bryan Stevenson’s powerful book *Just Mercy*. He shares his journey as a lawyer advocating for prisoners on death row, and introduces the beautiful concept of not just not throwing stones, but of catching them. Choose to be a stone catcher by reading Stevenson’s story, and perhaps, supporting or getting involved in his quest for fair and just treatment for all in the legal system.

Service Suggestion:

The adulteress in John 8 faced death by stoning for her wrongdoing. Was this just? What are the injustices in our justice system today? Research and articulate your opinion on the privatization of prisons, the national incarceration rate, and the power gap between guards and inmates. Engage others in conversation about these important topics. Visit a jail. In preparation for the day that you have to condemn a neighbor, make sure you know what your community’s sentence for criminals is.

Palm Sunday

Luke 22:14 - 23:56

“Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”

Will You Follow?

Palm Sunday is all about walking, isn't it? We find ourselves walking alongside the massive crowd who gathered outside of Jerusalem, waving our palm fronds, and singing “All glory, laud, and honor to you, Redeemer King.” We find ourselves walking with the crowd as they bring Jesus, bound in chains like a criminal, to the authorities. We walk around—pacing in anxiety—as Pilate questions our Lord, probes him unnecessarily and makes fun of him. We walk behind Jesus, stripped and beaten, as he makes his way to Calvary, a massive wooden cross bearing down on his already bruised and broken body. And then, after all that walking, we are asked a question: Will you follow? That is, perhaps, the hardest question of the Christian life, because it carries so many implications. The Passion narrative is one of miscarried justice. An innocent man—declared innocent by the governor—is sentenced to brutalization, to humiliation, and to death on a cross. Make no mistake—our “yes” to Jesus’ question of “Will you follow?” will always lead to the cross. When we choose to turn away from injustice, from sin, violence, from racism, from homophobia, from any and all forms of oppression, we choose to walk alongside Jesus to the cross. But do not fear! For the whole Church in heaven and on earth joins with you, waving palms, and singing “Hosanna!”

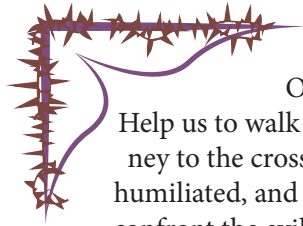
Witnessing Forgiveness

Palm Sunday always seems like a roller coaster of emotions for me. We wave palms and have a procession after hearing how Jesus was given a hero's welcome in Jerusalem and a few minutes later we are hearing about his death in the Gospel! Serving in mission can also take us on that type of emotional roller coaster. We celebrate with the people joyful moments such as births and graduations, as well as accompanying them through the sad times of death, and dealing with injustices.

Serving in El Salvador for eight years, I was witness to the terrible violence and insecurity that the Salvadoran people face daily. When the NGO for whom I was working did a survey, it was discovered that the teenagers and young adults in our programs feared death from the violence in the country, not contracting HIV or AIDS, which was our focus. In fact, that fear was realized when one of the young adults who was involved in our theatre group was killed by a gang member. At a memorial Mass at our office, his father prayed for the young man who had killed his son and forgave him. I hope that if anything so horrible happened to me or a loved one, I could have the strength to forgive. This act of forgiveness reminded me of Jesus’ forgiveness of those who crucified him and for his compassion for the other people being crucified with him.

Reflection by Cody Maynus,
Visitation Internship Program
Alumnus

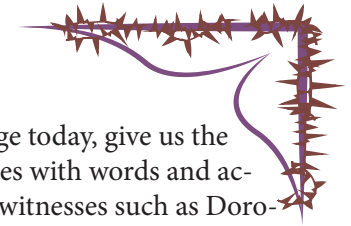
Reflection by Debbie Northern,
Maryknoll Lay Missioners Staff



O Jesus Christ, Redeemer King,

Help us to walk in Your shadow as You begin Your long journey to the cross. Make us mindful of those who are beaten, humiliated, and executed daily around the world. Teach us to confront the evil and oppression in our own lives, in our own communities, and in our own country. Wrap us in your kind embrace when we become frightened or anxious. We ask this always in the name of the One who breaks chains and sets all people free. Amen.

Prayer



Loving God,

As we listen to the Gospel message today, give us the courage to confront unjust structures with words and actions. Thank You for giving us brave witnesses such as Dorothy Day, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and, of course, Jesus, to teach us how to confront injustice without resorting to violence ourselves. Also help us to forgive those who have hurt us; to see their pain and fear, too. We thank you for the opportunity to share our joys and sorrows with others and to be part of a world community of sisters and brothers. Let us not despair, but realize that you are with us always. Amen.

Focus on:

Community

If you are choosing to walk with Jesus to the cross, think for a moment about who is joining you? What does that community look like? How are your current (or previous) experiences of community shaping and guiding your Lenten journey toward the cross? What does it feel like knowing that a community—your own, your parish, the Church—joins you on this journey?

Social Justice

Also in today's Gospel we hear about Pontius Pilate's dilemma in trying to deal with an injustice. He knew Jesus was innocent but bowed to political pressure. How often do we do the same? It is far easier to wash our hands of the consequences than take a stand against unjust structures. What injustices do we witness and how can we work for justice? Do we choose to remain ignorant of the root causes of injustice instead of listening to people's experiences and finding out more about issues?

Service Suggestion:

Think about the people in your neighborhoods, parishes, service-sites, and faith communities who do a lot of walking? Who are these people? There are a lot of people in my neighborhood who have to get to and from work, the doctor, the grocery store, and church on foot. There is also an exercise facility for senior citizens, most of whom walk laps around the building by themselves or in small groups. Consider joining some of these people—getting to know them, talking with them, praying with them—as they walk from place to place or around the gym. Take this opportunity to build relationships.

Service Suggestion:

There are many groups working around the world for justice and peace. Find out if there is a Pax Christi, Amnesty International, or Bread for the World group near you. What are the local organizations working for justice and peace? Read more about issues that are impacting our world to hear the side of the story that is not in the mainstream media such as the book *Enrique's Journey* that tells the story of a young man trying to get to the U.S. from Central America to find his mother.

Easter Sunday

John 20:1-9

“When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place.”

The Mystery of the Resurrection

Christ has risen! Truly, he has risen!

The Resurrection—the great triumph of Jesus Christ over sin and death. You’d think that John would depict such a momentous event in his Gospel, but no: mystery shrouds the Resurrection. We only glimpse the clues left behind: the heavy stone rolled away; the burial cloths left empty; the absence of a body.

When Mary Magdalene encounters the empty tomb, even though she stands at the site of this great miracle in salvation history, she panics. She does not understand what she sees. How many times have we found ourselves in her shoes? Stunned, afraid, and at a loss for what to do? In my ministry, not a day goes by without some obstacle or challenge, big or small. Maybe a student’s family has just lost their home; maybe only one girl shows up for choir practice, again. Ministry can be frustrating, and sometimes it’s difficult to see meaning in the hard days. Am I even making a difference?

In some ways, we are still like the apostles, who saw the empty tomb but did not understand its significance—did not realize that Christ had risen to bring us all to salvation. I don’t pretend to understand the many graces and “blessings in disguise” that God grants our school, but because I trust in His plan, I am filled with peace.

This Easter season, let us ponder how the Lord works in ways beyond our understanding, and let us pray that our eyes are opened

Reflection by Hannah Abalos,
Dominican Volunteers

to the extraordinary
miracles that take place
in our lives.

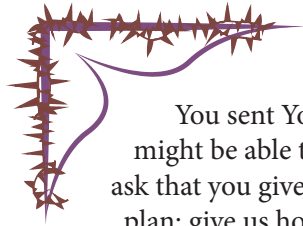
Service Inspired by the Empty Tomb

Coming to the end of my discernment and awaiting a new adventure in my upcoming year of volunteering, I ponder what is in store. I ask myself if no matter how much I give or offer, will I feel selfish for all that will be given back to me by those I serve? Having spent much time with the PHJC Sisters and their ministries since I was a youth, I have always found it hard to walk away not feeling that I gained more than I gave. As I filled out the application, it asked if I could work with the poor. I had worked beside them for a week at a time in differing ministries, but never lived, really lived among those less fortunate. Then I recalled my service in the Peace Corps, and yes, I did serve among those less fortunate, but the spirit of the people blinded me. I only saw the smiles, the laughter, the community, the souls of the people which soon made me realize, that perhaps, I was the one who was poor, and they were in fact serving me and opening my own eyes.

As I put myself into the words of the Gospel, I had to ask myself, am I not one in the crowd that shouts for His crucifixion when I turn a blind eye to an opportunity to serve someone in need. Though I may not shout those words, my actions may speak loudly at times when I deny the needs of others. I pray that as I begin this year of service, that I may reach up to take Jesus down from the cross with every good deed or word done in His holy name. Let us embrace the needs of others as if He is embracing us beside the empty tomb.

Reflection by Libby Riggs,

Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ
Volunteer Program

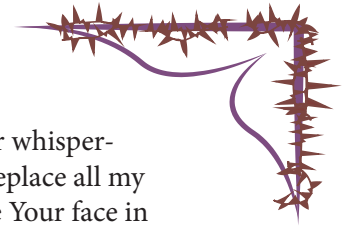


Loving God,

You sent Your beloved Son into the world so that we might be able to share in the glory of His Resurrection. We ask that you give us faith, that we may trust in your mysterious plan; give us hope, that we may persevere through trials; and give us love, that we may be inspired to be your hands and your feet to the people whom we serve. Be with us today and every day, as we joyfully bring to the world the news of your glorious Resurrection.

Amen.

Prayer



Lord,

Thank You for the gift of faith, for whispering to my heart, for the strength to replace all my fears with faith. Open my eyes to see Your face in the faces of those in need around me. Speak to me so that I hear and recognize what You most desire of me. Help me to continue to live more simply so that I am not bogged down by worldly possessions. As I leave behind the hectic, chaos of my former job, let me begin to quiet my heart so that I can live more fully for those I will be serving. Above all, Thank you, O Lord, for the beauty and blessings that you surround me with, never let me forget to live with a grateful heart, for You, my most prized possession.

Amen.

Focus on:

Community

When Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb of Jesus, she ran to Simon Peter and “the other disciple” to tell them what she had found. When confronting the unknown and failing to find answers, we often seek comfort in the presence of others. In your family or community, how do you cultivate a culture of caring? If you or any member of your community were experiencing a difficult time, would your community be a nurturing environment of acceptance for them? Is your community compassionate? Respectful? Patient? Forgiving?

Spirituality

Like Jesus, who often went away to pray alone, find a specific time of day to get away. Make this a time to be alone with Him. Reflect on how and where He calls, be grateful, but sit in the quiet of his embrace and allow His spirit to fill you and regenerate.

Service Suggestion:

Think of those who are lonely: the elderly; prison inmates; the sick in the hospital; or perhaps your next-door neighbor. During this season of Paschal joy, consider visiting someone who may not regularly have visitors, to bring the light of love into their life. Perhaps you can bake cookies, or bring other needed supplies. Even just bringing yourself and a smile could make that person’s day. Consider making this a regular act of service, perhaps monthly, or even weekly or daily.

Service Suggestion:

Rather than joining in the crowd that yelled to “crucify him!” look for ways to find your own voice to speak for those in need, to serve and represent those trampled by the crowd.

Easter Sunday

John 20:1-9

“When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place.”

Prayer

O Holy and loving God,

I give You thanks and praise for this day that You have made. Without You in my life, I don't know where I would be. Thank You for giving us Your Son to be the perfect example of how to live, loving and forgiving all. Despite any difficulties that come my way, may I always continue to strive after You, Lord, and see the joy in the sorrow. In Your Holy name, I pray.
Amen.

Easter Abroad: Reflections from Peru

In this Gospel reading we are present with Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter as they visit Jesus' tomb and shockingly discover that He is no longer there. After witnessing a horrifically painful death of their teacher and friend only a few days before, they are left worried and confused by His disappearance. Who could have taken Him? Where could He have gone? What does all of this mean?

This past year, I had the honor and privilege to celebrate the Lenten and Easter seasons, among many other special occasions in Lima, Peru. The forty days of Lent led me into a wonderful time of reflection, repentance and renewal, where I spent more time reading the Gospel, praying and journaling. I watched “The Passion of Christ” for the first time and sobbed for a very long time. On Good Friday, I truly mourned Jesus' death and spent time thinking about what His suffering means in my life. Then on Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday I rejoiced, gave thanks and praise and truly celebrated His resurrection. I felt rejuvenated!

I deepened my faith in Peru within the Franciscan community, and now I truly understand why Jesus died, so that we could live. I learned that His life is a true testament of how we should live our lives today: giving, being kind, showing compassion, forgiving others, and loving without reservation. Jesus died but resurrected to new life in each of us and He ascended into heaven so that we could one day join Him. He gives us the hope we need to know that there is always joy in sorrow.

Reflection by Stephanie Sanabria,
Capuchin Franciscan Volunteer Corps
Midwest, Alumna

Focus on:

Simple Living

During Lent, you may have decided to simplify your life a bit or to resist a temptation. Although the Lenten season is over, I challenge you to continue living simply by taking time to truly ask yourself (perhaps before you make a purchase): is this something I need or is this something I want?

Service Suggestion:

While in Peru, I worked at a comedor (parish soup kitchen) providing meals to families who were most in need and developing relationships with them. I encourage you to find your local soup kitchen and support them by serving, cleaning or greeting others. Most importantly truly engage and get to know your community through conversation and quality time!