Last week I recorded an interview for the Catholic Spirit with Bishop Joe Vásquez during which we talked about Lent (see the March issue). During our conversation, the bishop alluded to how we often tend to look at Lent as gloomy or sad.

“But it’s truly a wonderful time in the church,” he said. “Lent is about conversion because as we know conversion is a whole life process that never ends. The truth is we are human and we often get stuck on ourselves. Thankfully, we have the season of Lent each year to wake us up and to renew our faith.”

Those words could not be truer for me because it’s every year about this time I begin to realize how much I need Lent. The busy holidays have passed and my New Years’ resolutions have fallen by the wayside. The year seems to be going by too quickly, my kids are busy and work is demanding. I start to feel spiritually dry, and as
Bishop Vásquez said, I get stuck on myself and my relationship with Christ suffers. I begin to crave hitting the “restart” button on Ash Wednesday.

For me, Lent is a time to slow down and make time to feed my soul and bring balance back into my life. In Lents past, I have taken on new challenges and given up bad habits, which worked well for the most part. This year, however, instead of adding something new, I want to better use all the opportunities to feed my soul that are literally at my fingertips.

For example, I get the daily Scripture readings in my inbox every morning (you can too, visit www.usccb.org and click on “Bible” to subscribe). I do read them on most days, but I want to spend more than just two distracted minutes with them. I am also blessed to work in a place where attending daily Mass is simply a matter of walking down the hall. My goal is to make the effort to stop what I am doing and get to Mass at least once a week. I know from experience that just taking a little more time with Scripture and attending daily Mass will help me focus and open my eyes to His presence all around me.

I live within 2 miles of my parish, and pass the church an average of eight times a week. Jesus is there in the tabernacle, waiting patiently no doubt. I want to visit him at least once before Good Friday. It’s not about being too busy; it’s about making the time to stop the car, quiet my brain, surrender my worries and sit quietly with Christ. I have an open invitation, I just need to take him up on it!

As a family, we prepare sandwiches for Mobile Loaves and Fishes, but I can’t remember the last time we prayed for those we serve. Nightly prayer time used to be a daily event for us, but lately we have not prioritized it. That time is precious and as a family, we need it. At the very least, my kids and I need to be more thankful for our many blessings and pray more often for the less fortunate.

Then there are the faith formation opportunities that are at our fingertips. I teach second graders preparing to make their first Holy Communion, and my children attend weekly RE classes. There is no reason why I can’t share what we are learning in my class and vice versa. We need to be more deliberate as a family in sharing what we learn and Sunday night around the dinner table is a good place to do this.

This year I am focusing on the tried and true, and honestly, I’m excited. As our wise bishop said, Lent is a wonderful season of the church. May we all recognize and utilize the opportunities to draw closer to Christ that are literally at our fingertips.
This year is the 25th anniversary of the pastoral letter *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response*. This document is the foundation of stewardship within the U.S. and serves as the blueprint to develop and expand stewardship and build the Kingdom of God.

When we accept our lives as gifts, the Holy Spirit can use us as instruments to spread the Gospel. The pastoral letter reflects the core of the Easter message — stewardship always starts with a personal experience of the Risen Christ in our midst and in our hearts. The letter continues to spell out that good stewards live with joy and gratitude for the blessings they have received and returns those gifts with increase. The letter recognizes the importance of church support, including the sharing of time, talent and treasure and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. This way of life has its center and source of strength in the Eucharist.

Each one of us must discern, accept and live joyfully in the role that God calls us to live. This pastoral letter has served as an indispensable way to communicate a vision and extend an invitation to Christian people to “grasp the fact that they are no less than ‘God’s co-workers’ (1 Cor 3:9), with their own particular share in his creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work.”

In this anniversary year, it will be good for us to read and reflect on the letter, again or for the first time.

For a copy, please visit the International Catholic Stewardship Council website: www.catholicstewardship.com
As Catholics, stewardship is a central element of discipleship. Following Jesus, we grow in awareness of God as the source of all things. Christian discipleship and stewardship leads us to recognize our giftedness as we realize material, human and spiritual resources are not solely for individual consumption. Our talents and abilities are God’s gifts intended to be shared for building up God’s Kingdom. What God has given is intended to be given away to serve others. Recognition that all is gift, results in responses of gratitude.

We gather for Mass on Sunday as a response of loving gratitude for the gift of Christ’s resurrection and God’s invitation into relationship where, through initiation, we are re-oriented toward God rather than toward ourselves. Jesus’ self-giving love is the source and model of our response.

We sing the Mass rather than sing at Mass. Singing is what one does who is in love, as St. Augustine said. We sing in response to God’s presence in our lives of joy as well as struggle. It is our return gift to God for the gift of God’s love. Who sings? We all sing!

When one sings, one becomes more open to others and to God. Participating in common song strengthens the bonds between the singers. The rhythm of the music effects our own rhythms and gives rise to a unified song of praise. As we offer ourselves in song, the melodious voice of the assembly arises as a pleasant song of praise. Sung liturgy is a vehicle for being united with the rhythm of God’s love.

It is notable that the Church strenuously calls for full and actual participation in the liturgy by all the faithful (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Vat II), 14 & 48) and, of the ways this is occurs, the priority are acclamations and dialogues of the Mass, which the documents also list as those items which should be sung (Musicam Sacram, 29). The liturgy, as an action of the entire Body of Christ allowing the Church to be immersed in the diving life of the Trinity, participating in the eternal song of praise. Having made a joyful noise to the Lord (Ps 100), and having been placed in harmonious Communion with God, we are sent to “Glorify the Lord by our lives.” We are sent as overflowing vessels of God’s love. When we do not share God’s gifts, we fail to make room to continue to receive God’s love. The Mass is a school, which teaches us that discipleship and stewardship are expressions of melodious gratitude in love. The Mass gives us the grace to live lives of self-giving stewardship and discipleship. As we live as Jesus did as self-emptying stewards, we are able to more fully able to receive God grace in the liturgy and our lives.

Attention Hispanic Liturgical Musicians:
Join us in Austin at St. Dominic Savio Catholic High School for the Hispanic Pastoral Musicians Conference on July 27-29 as we explore the role of music in the liturgy and our call to ministerial discipleship. For more information go to: www.austindiocese.org/HPMC
I have served in youth ministry for just over 16 years. In that time, I have shared in the joy of walking with teens and their families through receiving the sacraments, powerful conversion and many other joys that life brings. I have also walked the journey of sorrow — the loss of a sibling, friend or parent; or, journeying with a parents whose children start down the wrong path.

The “three-legged stool” model of stewardship addresses time, talent and treasure as “legs” of giving. For youth ministry, the necessity of treasure is inevitable; supplies and events cost money. Of the three, time and talent are vital in a different way. We discuss youth ministry as relational because it is focused on discipleship. That relationship allows people to journey and grow in faith together. It also allows people to share in those joys and uplift each other in times of sorrow.

Often invitations to serve in youth ministry are met with responses of people’s insecurities. “I’m too old,” or “young people don’t think I’m cool,” are answers I commonly receive. In a society that is driven by media, technology and secularism, it is important now, more than ever, that young people form authentic relationships — with people of all different ages — who will love them for who they are and who guide them in faith. Maybe you aren’t comfortable being on a catechetical team, but you can serve by coordinating a service project. Maybe you can help with a fundraiser or help provide dinner after Mass. Young people know and appreciate those who use the gifts of time and talent to help them grow. They also look to adults as leaders on life’s journey, helping to navigate matters of faith and morals.

Melissa Minnich helps coordinate youth ministry at St. John Vianney Parish in Round Rock, and has been involved, in some way, with children and youth ministry for 32 years. She has served as a catechist, helped coordinate Vacation Bible School, helped with confirmation, reconciliation and First Eucharist formation. She has also led liturgical training for youth as well as help with middle school and high school diocesan events. Shortly after she graduated from college, she was invited by her parish priest to serve as a ninth grade catechist. “I was invited by my priest who saw a gift within me,” she said. That invitation opened her up to the idea of serving and she continued to do so as she and her family moved cross-country over the years. “The power of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit truly move me where I need to go,” she said of her varying service opportunities. “It’s just an awesome experience.” Minnich said her prayer life has grown through her service to the youth — from experiencing various ways to pray at retreats and conferences, to praying for them as they grow in discipleship through youth ministry.

Each one of us will answer the call to be good stewards of our gifts in various ways: No two people have the same gifts, which reflects the beauty of our Creator. Through discernment of how we are being called to serve we can discover much about ourselves. Sometimes that discovery comes through strengths we didn’t realize we had and at other times in gifts we didn’t see in ourselves. When we offer those gifts to others, as we accompany the youth of our Church, we are truly building up the Body of Christ.
Celebrating Saints

Fidelis of Sigmaringen
Priest and Martyr

(1578-1622), OPTIONAL MEMORIAL – APRIL 24

Complete generosity to others was the hallmark of this saint. A lawyer who took the cases of the poor and oppressed, he eventually grew disenchanted by the injustices he witnessed and left the practice of law to become a Capuchin. In addition to preaching, he was devoted to the care of the sick and the poor. “He practiced the fullness of charity in bringing consolation and relief to his neighbors as well as strangers. With a father’s love he embraced all who were in trouble. He supported great numbers of poor people with the alms he had collected from every quarter,” Pope Benedict XIV said of him. In his last sermon, St. Fidelis explained it this way: “What is it that today makes true followers of Christ cast luxuries aside, leave pleasures behind, and endure difficulties and pain? It is living faith that expresses itself through love. It is this that makes us put aside the goods of the present in the hope of future goods.” “A living faith that expresses itself through love...” That’s a pretty good definition of stewardship!

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