

Save the world in an ordinary way

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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This is Bishop Paul Marshall's February column for secular newspapers, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by The Morning Call, Allentown, on the first Saturday of every month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. More than 110 columns have been published over the past ten years.

I feel the ambivalence mounting. Most Christians in Pennsylvania are about to start their annual tune-up, Lent.

Some are thinking about what they will give up; some, about what they will take on. Some are thinking about going on a diet and getting religious credit for it. Others think it is silly and will ignore it.

The concept of six weeks of focus on what one values most – deliberately pushing distractions aside – is useful, even for those who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious,” as the personal ads put it.

For those just beginning to think about a constructive springtime for their interior life, I mention a few possibilities that involve the saving of the world in a very ordinary sense.

From Bono and U2 to interfaith groups to the United Nations itself, we have a heightened awareness that we have the means to address poverty, inequality, and the sustainability of the earth with a modicum of effort. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) continue to gather momentum across the planet. You can study the eight simple goals at www.un.org/millenniumgoals .

Whether one practices a religion or not, undertaking a few simple spiritual disciplines in solidarity with the MDG can give each of us personal depth and increased commitment to be of use to our species.

The tradition of fasting has many uses – you meet the rough edges of your personality quickly when you are hungry. We might go beyond that this year.

What if one day a week we went without food, or did so at least for 12 hours? I suspect that would heighten our sense of connection with those for whom starvation is not a choice, and free up a little money we might offer to feed them. It would help reconnect us with the 1.5 billion or so people on the planet who live on less than one dollar a day.

Another path of “fasting” that has more than one effect on us has to do with the tube. What would be the effect of unplugging your televisions for six weeks?

When we have done this in our home we find that it deepens our awareness of human community. The family has to talk to each other.

It deepens our connection to the life of the world's majority whose "entertainment" is the (at times) more meaningful experience of sharing silence, telling stories, encountering literature, listening to music, and relating to God in prayer. This can also be a time to rediscover how much the imagination is stimulated by listening to the radio.

A third possibility remains. You might want to join me in pledging not to acquire anything other than food, healthcare, and necessary maintenance items during those forty days of Lent.

Such a discipline offers us the opportunity to imagine a primary identity other than "consumer of goods and services" and to see if that does not direct our self-image from consumer to child of God, whose dignity is located in who one is rather than what one has.

Such abstinence helps us realize that for most of the world, shopping for entertainment or stress relief is an unknown concept. It would drive us to more meaningful ways to scratch our itches and soothe our souls. What we do not spend we might divide between savings and charity.

There are many other ways to tune up one's soul. The common element in those I suggest here is the one-two action of pulling away from the usual comfort zone in order to connect and care for the larger world.

Lent means springtime, when things grow. I wish you much growth.

[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at www.diobeth.org.]