



**When I was growing up, our high school soccer coach wanted to make absolutely sure we were ready for the regular season.**

We were all a little concerned when he emerged from his car without soccer balls for the first two weeks of practice at our school in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. These weeks consisted of running, sprinting, stretching and running some more. The third week was focused on fundamentals — dribbling, passing, penalty kicks and some attack strategies.

Finally, in the fourth week, he allowed us to scrimmage and have a little fun. Our coach had played professional soccer with Pele in Brazil; he knew the game extremely well, and knew how to bring out the best in each one of us. Thanks in large part to the long and tough practice sessions we endured in August, our team was more than ready for the regular season — and we had a solid year.

Lent is the Catholic Church's version of spring training for the soul. It's 40 days to get our soul back into shape through intense prayer, purification and charity. And make sure you invite the Holy Spirit to be a big part of it — as He is the best "spiritual" coach in the world.

## **1.) Prayer**

Jesus himself lived the first Lent during his 40 days in the desert. He chose the desert to get away from the noise and distraction of the world; He chose the desert for the solitude and silence of the sand and the lack of humanity; and He chose the desert so He could wholeheartedly focus on intimate prayer and conversation with His Heavenly Father.

He wanted to fully unite himself with His Father, before beginning His "regular season," His three years of intense apostolic ministry and total self-giving.

Every serious Lenten resolution should have a component of increased prayer and devotion. Perhaps adding one or more of these activities could be helpful for you: Daily Mass, Eucharistic visit, rosary, more spiritual communions, and Scriptural meditation.

There are so many ways to connect with Jesus; find one or two that work for you. Your family and friends most need Jesus from you.

## **2.) Purification**

Lent should not simply be a weight-loss clinic or a time to detox your body from an unhealthy lifestyle. Ask yourself, What am I overly attached to, and why? What unhealthy dependency am I developing that is preventing me from knowing and loving Christ more? What is getting in the way?

Many people have told me they absolutely need two or three glasses of wine to calm down before going to bed; others are not willing to give up their weekly TV show that may be enjoyable but that promotes infidelity to marriage. Others might need to “fast” the amount of time they dedicate to checking their Facebook or Instagram page, while still others may need to take the “salt” out of their daily communication and make an effort to be more kind in speech. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you with this one.

My greatest fear in soccer was to pull a hamstring or twist an ankle — what is putting your soul most at risk? Ask God in prayer, “How am I getting in your way, Jesus, and what do you want me to work on?”

## **3.) Charity**

Last year, I started a youth program in Connecticut with a focus on doing “mercy in your back yard” once a month.

These kids are actually enjoying it, even though it may mean getting up at 6 a.m. to help out with people who come to a soup kitchen in Port Chester, New York, for food. Or, these kids will spend their Saturday afternoons playing Bingo at a local nursing home, or doing some painting at the local Boys and Girls club, or going into the city to serve the homeless....

There is so much joy in giving. Every community has so many needy people and needy organizations that could use a hand. Get your hands dirty. One of our business leaders along with his employees will soon be going into the streets of Manhattan once a month to take a homeless person to McDonald’s for lunch and actually eat with this individual. The lists of options is endless. In giving, you discover the face and beauty of Christ in these poor and marginalized souls, and you will be more than compensated for your outreach.

Christ loves these souls in a special way, but He doesn’t have enough hands and feet that are willing to give up the time and energy to serve them.

C.S. Lewis reminds us, “Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have his way, come to share in the life of Christ ... He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has—by what I call a “good infection.” Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of Christianity is simply nothing else.”

The Holy Spirit is the ultimate “soul” coach within each of your hearts — and He is trying to bring out this image of Christ that, over time, has been covered by our selfishness, passions and imperfections. Ask Him where you need to go. Try to collaborate with Him during this Lenten period so that by dying to self — you can truly rise with Christ, into that new man or woman He so desires and needs to see emerge.

*Fr. Michael Sliney is a Catholic priest based in New York and an adviser to the Lumen Institute, a professional business group.*