

Think globally, act locally: A Lenten theme

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The meeting at Lafayette City Hall was packed on the evening of January 30. I was there to hear about local initiatives to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Indiana is said to rank sixth nationally because of the outputs of industry and agriculture. After a brief slide presentation about what other communities are doing, some scientists and climate advocates rose to speak. The tone was moderate and informative. People stayed focused on CO2. They agreed that we have to begin reducing emissions a lot, beginning now.

The named goals were relatively humble and attainable with current technologies. But they require some public will and shared responsibility. Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si* is much more expansive. It treats the whole of human ecology which includes, of course, climate concerns.

If all states and nations do not commit equally to the project, and many have worked at it for years already, there is hope that improvement efforts will eventually coalesce. Isn't this our ongoing hope in promoting moral goodness, spiritual holiness? No one person believes they can convert the world alone. But we believe that a shared vision and behavior can make the world a better place. If you have read Malcolm Gladwell's "The Tipping Point," you have an idea of what I am talking about. Seemingly small changes can produce profound effects.

Lent in Catholicism has a traditional menu of large and small gestures. Here are some accessible suggestions. Imagine saying to God before you exit bed every morning, "You are my God, and I am your child." I might start to believe that I have to live up to that!

Participate in Catholic Relief Services Rice Bowl. This program collects small sacrifices from millions of people to help people survive adverse situations. Read and think about the Sunday readings during the week ahead of Mass. This might help the homily to connect more effectively. Fasting and Friday abstinence from meat are not just about personal mortification, but expressions of religious solidarity. The one-hour fast before Communion is reverential toward the Eucharist AND fellow communicants. We process toward Communion as a WE not simply an I.

It should make us curious that the smallness of some gestures has caused many to judge them less important or ineffectual. I think about how silence, meditation and fasting have been "discovered" by wellness gurus.

The small dark cross on my forehead on Ash Wednesday (this year, February 26) is another moment of public confession by individuals and the whole Church. It does not say that I am defective. It says that I desire to love better our God and his other children. And its visibility provides small paths to big evangelization.

I like to repeat the story about my Ash Wednesday encounter with a gas station clerk. As I prepared for my purchase, she leaned over the counter and whispered, "You have some dirt on your forehead." I mentioned that it was a communal sign of repentance that I received that morning at Church.

That encounter has not been repeated now for many years. But I am guessing that if it happens nowadays, a clerk will lean over the counter a second time to ask me if that smudged cross comes only in the color black. I hope I am quick enough to make my reply about Christ and not simply color.