



LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER FROM HIS LORDSHIP THE BISHOP

Turn to the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful
(Joel 2:13)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,
Last Wednesday we celebrated Ash Wednesday, a day when ashes are imposed on our foreheads and we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. We are called to repent and believe in the Gospel.

Return to me with all your heart, with fasting (Joel 2: 12)

Ash Wednesday is a day of fasting and abstinence as is also Good Friday. All persons who have completed their fourteenth year are bound by the law of abstinence; all adults are bound by the law of fast up to the beginning of their sixtieth year. The church invites us to do acts of penance and self-sacrifice not just on these two very special days. Throughout Lent, and on all Fridays during the year that do not fall on a Solemnity or on a Feast, we are called to do acts of self-denial.

The tradition of Lent is one of offering sacrifices and sufferings up as acts of penance for the forgiveness of sins. The forty days of Lent are based on the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert in prayer and fasting. At the end of these forty days Jesus was tempted by the devil but he overcame those temptations. We too are tempted and prayer and self-denial are a good means to be able to overcome temptations.

Nobody is free from temptation, and we are human and at times we do fall. What is important is not to stay down once we fall but to get up again and carry on with the fight against what is evil and wrong.

During this Lent, we can take on some small sufferings through our acts of self-denial and penance not only to prepare ourselves against falling into temptation but also in a desire to share in the sufferings of Christ.

Lent is a holy season. It is a season of grace. It is a time for spiritual renewal. This year, as we enter into this holy season, let us offer our efforts of penance and self-denial for the purification of the Church. Let us unite our Lenten disciplines with the sufferings of Christ.

The suggested acts of self-denial during Lent, as for all (non-Feast/Solemnity) Fridays during the Year, in Gibraltar are the following:

- a) the long-standing tradition of abstaining from meat (or some other food);
- b) abstaining from alcoholic drink, smoking or some form of amusement;
- c) making the special effort involved in family prayer, taking part in the Mass, visiting the Blessed Sacrament or praying the Stations of the Cross;
- d) fasting from all food for a longer period than usual and perhaps giving what is saved in this way to the needy at home and abroad;
- e) making a special effort to help somebody who is poor, sick, old or lonely.

We beseech you, be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20)

Apart from penance and acts of self-denial, Lent also concentrates on the call for repentance. Jesus started his public ministry by calling on us to repent and believe the Good News. The Good News is Jesus himself. who humbled himself and took on our human nature to show us how much God cares for us and loves us.

God never forgets us, and God never stops loving each one of us. But do we really believe that? Are we convinced of God's infinite love for us? We can be all too conscious of failure, of weakness, and of sinfulness.

Because of our lifestyle, and the pull all around us to forget God, we feel unworthy to be Christ's servants, and unable to open ourselves up to God's loving and forgiving embrace.

This is how the younger son in the parable of the Prodigal Son felt after leaving his father's house and spending all he had. Then he realized how miserable he was and how all those at his father's house were much better off than he was. He presumed that his father would be angry with him for wasting his time and money on a life of pleasure. But the father waits, and hopes, and responds with overflowing joy when his son returns. The message of the parable is evident – God waits for us to return to Him. He does not concentrate on our failures but on his joy of welcoming us back to his house.

In the Lord's death on the cross God has reconciled humanity to himself. At the beginning of Lent we hear afresh the call to reconciliation with God. It is the period in the Church's liturgical calendar when there is a particular focus on God's sacrificial love for us. During this time we focus on what God has done for us. We take stock of our lives and assess how we are living the ideals of the Christian life. As St Paul writes: "Now is the acceptable time; this is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor 6:2).

It is only through admitting our sin and seeking forgiveness that we can receive God's mercy and live in a fuller union with him. It is by recognizing our sinfulness that we invite God to carry out his saving work in us. It is not an easy thing, but it is a most freeing thing to be able to say, "I am a sinner".

The Good News we are called to believe is that our God is a God of mercy and compassion. This is our faith, and this is what we should be reflecting on this Lent.

We are all sinners, and we should feel confident and welcome in turning back to God. Then we can celebrate happily the Sacrament of Reconciliation and fully participate in the Sacrifice of the Mass through the reception of Holy Communion.

At times we can find it so hard to go to Confession, even when we know we are in need of the sacrament and the healing grace it offers. The Sacrament of Reconciliation properly understood is not a sacrament of penalty but a sacrament of healing, it is a sacrament of love.

Lent is a time to renew our journey of faith, both as individuals and as a community, with the help of the word of God and the sacraments, and especially with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is a journey marked by prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Last year we started a campaign as a Diocese to help Aid to the Church in Need, and the response was truly amazing and encouraging. I once again appeal to you and encourage all that this Lent also, through our spirit of self-sacrifice, the resulting savings and personal contributions will be aimed mainly to help the Christians in Aleppo, who have suffered so much and who are now returning slowly back to their homes.

Invoking Mary's protection over us and her intercession, may we journey with her during this Lent as she accompanied her son on the way of the cross and share in her sorrow under the cross.

With an assurance of my prayers and blessing for you all this Lent,

+Carmel Zammit
Bishop of Gibraltar