

DIOCESE OF NORTHAMPTON



LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

There are two moments in the liturgy which move me deeply – the Imposition of Ashes on Ash Wednesday and the Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday. Why? Because everyone in the church is able to take part. No one is excluded. Those two moments bring home to me the infinite mercy of God.

The days of Lent, beginning this Ash Wednesday, are a time for us to open our hearts to that mercy of God in prayer, in fasting and in almsgiving.

In his message for Lent, Pope Francis points out how easy it is for us to become desensitised to those around us, to the world in which we live, to our faith in God. There are so many pressures on us and so little time. We get caught up in momentary pleasures and addictions. We become slaves to money and what money can buy. We think we are self-sufficient and end up trapped by loneliness. Appearances become more important than what is real and true. Our hearts can grow cold.

The Holy Father speaks of hearts that grow cold because of a greed for money. That, in turn, leads to a disregard for the unborn child, for the elderly and the infirm, and for the migrant and the foreigner. It negates our concern for creation and the consequent poisoning of land and sea. Within our families and parish communities, we can become self-absorbed and pessimistic. We can war among ourselves and forget the call to holiness, to be brothers and sisters in the Lord.

I wonder if some of those phrases touch you as much as they touch me. Or maybe you feel broken inside and do not know how to fix it?

In today's Gospel, Jesus heals a leper. That begins with the leper coming to Jesus and pleading with him. This is what Lent is all about. It is a time to come back to Jesus wholeheartedly and in every aspect of our lives, to be soothed by God's healing grace.

Between now and Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, let each of us plan what we can do to pray, to fast, and to give alms. For all of us, time is an issue. Yet, it is amazing how we can find time to do what we want on our social media platforms!

So, a time for prayer, to raise our hearts and minds to God, just to be in the presence and what sometimes feels like the absence of God. Let God shine a light on all that takes us away from truth deep inside us. Then there is fasting, not just to lose weight, but to waken us up to God, helping us to hunger and thirst for God in our lives. And, finally, there is an opportunity for almsgiving, to recognise Christ in those who are in need and to counter selfish greed.

On the eve of the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Mothering Sunday, with Pope Francis, I would like to encourage parishes to engage in what is called "24 Hours for the Lord." From Friday evening, 9 March to Saturday evening, 10 March, I hope that at some point some parishes will celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the context of Eucharistic Adoration. May it be a time of conversion when we turn back to Christ and receive his healing forgiveness.

So, together let us take up the Lenten journey with enthusiasm. May God sustain us in our prayer, in our fasting, and in our almsgiving for his greater glory. Then we will be ready to receive the light of Easter, the light of Christ rising in glory and dispelling the darkness of our hearts and minds.

"May God, the Father of mercies,
who has given you an example of love
in the Passion of his Only Begotten Son
grant that, by serving God and your neighbour,
you may lay hold of his wondrous blessing.
Amen."

With prayers for a fruitful Lent,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a cross symbol followed by the name "Peter".

Bishop of Northampton

*To be read and/or made available at all Masses of
the Sixth Ordinary Sunday of the Year, 10/11 February 2018.*