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PASTORAL LETTER - LENT 2021 -

Dear Brothers and Sisters

As we begin the season of Lent, it is important to remember its purpose. The word 'lent' derives from the Anglo-Saxon word for springtime ('lencten').

Our spiritual springtime

Lent is the 'springtime' of the Christian life. We recall why Jesus came, and renew our efforts to respond to him. He taught¹

I came that they may have life and have it to the full.

The 'life' he was referring to is his own divine life as the Son of God, the 'eternal life' he shares with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. We have shared in this life since our Baptisms when we were born again 'of water and the Holy Spirit'.²

The question for each of us this Lent, therefore, is '*Am I growing in the divine life Jesus wants to share with me "to the full"?*'

Am I expressing the divine life increasingly in human ways?

In springtime, the beauty in nature emerges. Leaves grow again on boughs bared by winter, and flowers bloom as sap courses again through trees and plants.

In Lent, we seek to renew our response to the Christ whose divine life we share. As we do so, the power of this life grows within us, moving us to think, speak and behave more like him. We express this divine life in human ways in our daily lives and relationships: our marriages and families; over workplaces and communities.

Some examples

As we respond to Christ, his 'life' grows within us so that Christ-like love and forgiveness grow, and selfishness and resentments against those who have offended us weaken; Christ-like mercy and compassion grow, and judgementalism and indifference to the sufferings of others weaken. The capacity of our hearts to love expands to embrace those in need within and beyond our shores.

The power of Christ's resurrection empowers increasingly to love in self sacrificing ways Jesus taught during the Last Supper.³ It strengthens against temptations to sin, reflecting the strength of Jesus who resisted temptations by Satan after his forty day fast in the desert.⁴

It heals life hurts, and replaces confusion about human heart life questions with wisdom. It consoles griefs and replaces inclinations to despair with hope. Troubled hearts are soothed by an inner peace that Christ alone can give.⁵

The call to 'repent and believe the good news'

For the divine life to grow within us, our lives need to be oriented to God and away from everything contrary to God. Yet, in daily life, pressures and habits can weaken our conversion to Christ and his gospel.

In Lent, therefore, we remember his call: 'Repent and believe the good news'.⁶ To 'repent' means to re-orient our lives to God and to turn away from sin. To 'believe the good news' means to believe and turn to Christ, who empowers Christian repentance. We do so in three traditional ways.

¹ John 10:10

² John 3:7

³ John 15:12-13

⁴ Matthew 4:2

⁵ John 14:27

⁶ Mark 1:15

Prayer

The divine life grows or weakens in us, depending upon our personal relationship with the Risen Jesus himself. Daily prayer is essential for this, as is communication in any relationship.

The first prayer, as for the Apostles, is *daily conversation with Christ* about our lives, our life experiences and our life issues. We need to share with him the events and feelings of the day; our stresses and struggles; the thoughts and feelings which bother us. This prayer is the climax of what theologians call 'the dialogue of salvation'. It is the prayer the Apostles knew, the one in which we open our hearts to Christ's divine life.

Then there are other prayers and devotions which have grown within the Church over the past 2000 years. These too are good during Lent.

Fasting

To grow in Christ-like beauty, we need to recognise inner movements by the Holy Spirit in daily marriage, family, work, recreation, community and other situations. However, those inner movements can be drowned out by strong emotions and other inner influences.

In Lent, we renew our efforts to recognise these movement and to weaken influence which are not of the Spirit by *fasting*. This means denying ourselves something our desires and feelings seek.

Our appetite for food often is the most basic and so many go without favourite foods and sweets to discipline this appetite.

Giving alms

Jesus taught that we need to help those in need. ⁷ This is the purpose of almsgiving.

In Australia, we do this by contributing to Project Compassion. 'Compassion' means sharing in the suffering of others, so the spirituality of this project is to deny ourselves and to give the money we would spend normally upon ourselves to those in need through Project Compassion. In denying ourselves, we think of the daily privation of others.

Jesus warned too how attachment to money and material possessions undermines growth in faith ⁸ and so growth in the divine life.

And 'believe the good news'

As we strive to live the lenten discipline, we seek to draw on Christ's power to help us do so. We recall the means he instituted for this purpose within the Easter events.

During the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the Eucharist, after teaching that it is essential for growth in the divine life. ⁹ Even if for a good motive, not to receive the Eucharist leaves spiritual malnutrition and weakens the divine life within.

After his Resurrection, the Risen Jesus instituted the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. ¹⁰ The purpose of this sacrament is reconciliation, the renewal of relationship with Christ and the strengthening of the divine life within. ¹¹

We can seek forgiveness from Christ in other ways as well, but forgiveness and reconciliation are different realities. We may forgive someone, but this does not mean necessarily that the relationship is restored. Through this sacrament, the Risen Jesus does not simply forgive: he restores the relationship with God as though there had been no sin.

Conclusion

Let us embrace the lenten discipline so that, by Easter, the divine life in us all has grown a little more to 'the full'. May the Christ-like beauty within each of us emerge at least a little more during this period of spiritual springtime.

God Bless, Bishop Gerard Holohan

20th February 2021

⁷ eg Matthew 25:35-40, 42-45

⁸ eg Mark 4:19; Matthew 6:24

⁹ John 6:53-55

¹⁰ John 20:22-23

¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church