

## L E N T E N P A S T O R A L L E T T E R 2 0 1 2

# Lent: Becoming the Face of God for the World

To the priests, deacons, men and women in consecrated life and all the faithful:

***The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.***

(2 Cor 13:13)



BISHOP ARTHUR  
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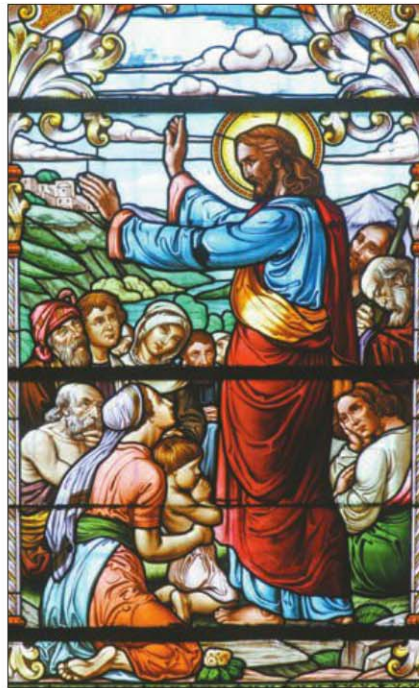
**A**S we enter once again the Holy Season of Lent, we strive to live more fully under the Law of Christ. On our Lenten pilgrimage, we climb the Lord's mountain (cf. *Mt* 4:1-4) and we recommit ourselves to our common Christian vocation to be the face of God for the world. I invite you to prayerfully join with me in meditating on the teaching of Jesus, the New Moses, who leads us from the slavery of sin to the freedom of the children of God that "we may merit to be coheirs to eternal life" (Eucharistic Prayer II).

[1] The Sermon on the Mount is the very first teaching of Jesus given to us by Matthew. From the beginning of his gospel, Matthew prepares us for this dramatic moment of receiving Jesus' teaching. In the first four chapters of his gospel, Matthew evokes for us the figure of Moses. He wants us to see how much the life of Moses prefigures the life of Jesus. By one comparison after another, Matthew leads us to recognize Jesus as the teacher, the prophet and the lawgiver who is not simply equal to, but superior to Moses.

[2] Pharaoh killed all the baby boys of the Hebrews, but Moses was saved (*Ex* 1:22-2:10). Herod kills all the baby boys born at the time of Jesus' birth, but Jesus is saved (*Mt* 2:13-18). When Moses' life was in danger, he fled (*Ex* 2:15). When Herod threatens Jesus' life, Jesus, with Mary and Joseph, flees to Egypt. And, just as Moses came up out of Egypt to the Promised Land, Jesus comes out of Egypt and back to the Promised Land (*Mt* 2:13-21).

[3] Even the baptism of Jesus recalls the great figure of Moses. In the Exodus events, Moses led the Hebrews from slavery to freedom. He first passed through the waters of the Red Sea and, then, for forty years, experienced the temptations in the wilderness. In the New Exodus, Jesus leads all people from the slavery of sin to the freedom of the children of God. Likewise, he first passes through the waters of the Jordan and, then, for 40 days, he undergoes the temptations in the desert (cf. *Mt* 4:1-11). And just as in the Exodus events, Moses gave the Torah (the Law or Teaching), so too, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives his Torah.

[4] Jesus had been going about Galilee preaching, teaching and healing; and, crowds from Galilee and beyond were already following him (cf. *Mt* 4:23-25). Now, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins to teach the crowds at length. "Seeing the crowds," Matthew says, "Jesus went up on the mountain and when he had sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them..." (*Mt* 5:1-2). As Moses went up the mountain to receive the Torah, Jesus goes up the mountain to give his Torah.



[5] Before speaking, Jesus sits. In the East, this is the posture of the teacher. But this is no ordinary teacher. The disciples approach Jesus. It is a gesture of respect. They approach him to hear his words as one would approach a king seated on his royal throne. The Messiah is about to give his inaugural sermon. He speaks not simply to the 12 but to the disciples who represent the whole Church. In the Sermon on the Mount, he is explaining what life is like in the kingdom of God that he is ushering in.

[6] Of the five sermons Jesus gives in Matthew's gospel, the Sermon on the Mount is not only the first but the longest and the most carefully arranged. Matthew has structured Jesus' teaching around a known rabbinic pattern. Four centuries before Christ, the high priest Simon the Just is reported to have said, "By three things the world is sustained: by the

law, by the Temple service, and by deeds of loving kindness" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:2). In *Mt* 5:17-7:17, the evangelist organizes Jesus' teaching according to this well-known pattern.

[7] At the center of his teaching about the law, Temple service and charity, Jesus explains to his disciples that true religion, true worship of God, means acknowledging that God is God alone. Our actions, whether done in public or in private, must center on God, not on self. Thus, almsgiving, prayer and fasting are to be done not to win favor with others, but solely to give glory to God (cf. *Mt* 6:1-18). These three practices that Jesus explains as ways of truly worshipping God are at the heart of Lent.

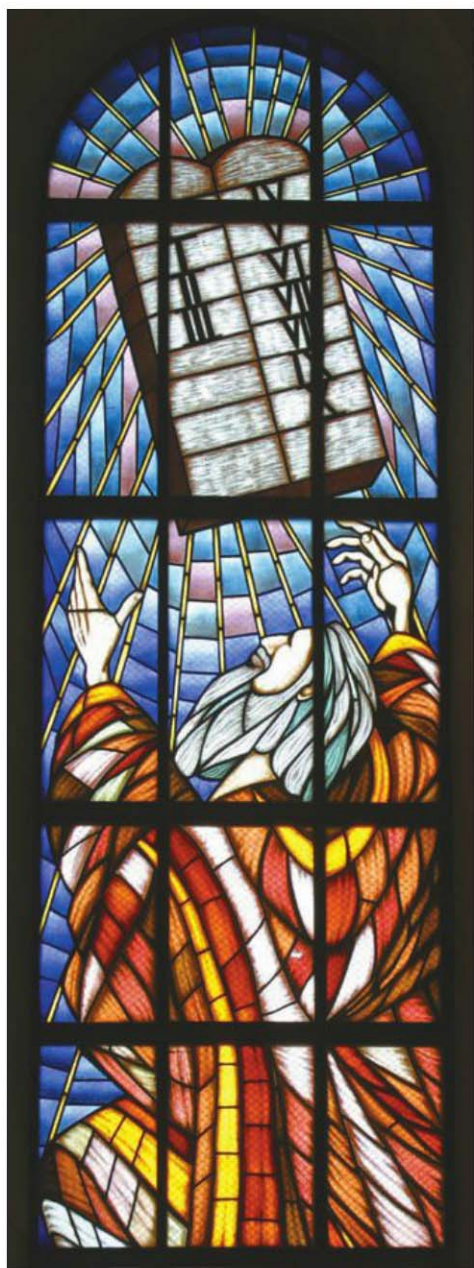
[8] Each Lent, we undertake these practices so as to unite ourselves more fully to Jesus in his temptations in the desert. Like Moses, who fasted before beginning his mission as lawgiver (cf. *Ex* 34:28), Jesus prepared himself through prayer and fasting for his mission as the Messiah. Each year, we prepare ourselves to live out our Christian mission more fully in the world through our Lenten observance.

[9] During the Holy Season of Lent, we commit ourselves again to "the three penitential practices that are very dear to the biblical and Christian tradition — prayer, almsgiving, fasting — to prepare us to better celebrate Easter and thus experience God's power that, as we shall hear in the Paschal Vigil, 'dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy, casts out hatred, brings us peace and humbles earthly pride' (*Paschal Praeconium*)" (Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent*, 2009).

[10] For a moment, let us look at each of the three practices of Lent. Not without good reason does the Church commend them to us at this time. Each practice opens us to God and to one another.







[11] First, prayer. Through prayer, we place ourselves in the Presence of God. When Jesus underwent the temptations in the desert, he was "led by the Spirit" (Mt 4:1). There was never a moment when he was not in the Presence of God. During Lent, we find more time to pray, to be in the Presence of God and let the Holy Spirit lead us.

[12] The Eucharist is the highest and greatest prayer in which we can share. The Eucharist is the very prayer of Christ himself on the cross. It is the great act of thanksgiving in which the whole of our redemption is made present. A more frequent attendance at Mass, therefore, most efficaciously helps us place our lives in the hands of God. Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, the Rosary, Stations of the Cross, *lectio divina* (prayerful reading and meditation on the Word of God): these and other private devotions open us to God's Presence and to the working of the Holy Spirit.

[13] When we pray, we enter into a dialogue of word and silence that transforms us. At times, we converse with God in our own words, pouring out our hopes and disappointments, our sorrows and our joys. At times, we use prayers

that we have learned from others. Sometimes we speak to God in the prayer of the Church or the very words of Scripture. At other times, we converse with the silence of our hearts.

[14] In each form of prayer, the center of our life shifts from self to the One who is Truth, Goodness and Beauty (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 33). Prayer opens us up to God and to his presence in others. In the light of prayer, our life, like the rose in spring, unfolds before the warmth of God's love and we become more pleasing to God.

[15] Second, fasting. Through fasting, we gain not simply a greater control over our appetites, but we train our will to do God's will with greater ease and enthusiasm. As St. Peter Chrysologus teaches, "fasting is the helm of human life and governs the whole ship of our body" (Sermon VII: *de jejuniis* 1.) When we succeed in saying "no" to ourselves, we are more apt to say "yes" to God.

[16] Fasting involves the body, because we are flesh and blood. When we fast, we deny ourselves food and other legitimate pleasures that the body craves so that we can attend more easily to what the spirit needs. Fasting is not simply a form of abstinence by which we suffer some deprivation. It is a positive affirmation of the priority of those things that last over those things that quickly pass. In fact, as St. Peter Chrysologus also teaches, "Fasting is peace of the body, strength of minds, and vigor of souls" (Sermon VII: *de jejuniis* 3).

[17] Jesus' fasting in the desert enabled him in his human nature to live his whole life in surrender to God, "becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). In fasting, like Jesus, we place our whole life on the altar of obedience. We surrender our human will to the divine will. There is no love without sacrifice.

[18] Third, almsgiving. Through almsgiving or works of charity, we make real the truth of who we are. We are tenants on a land that does not belong to us. We are caretakers of a vineyard that belongs to the Lord. He wishes us to enjoy the fruit of our labors, but he also expects us to share his gifts with others. We do not own the things of this world. God places whatever we have in our hands for our own well-being and the good of others. We are not meant to live for ourselves alone, but for God and others (cf. 2 Cor 5:15).

[19] Acts of charity free us from undue attachment to the things of this world. As Jesus taught, "You cannot serve both God and Mammon" (Lk 16:13). Caring for the needs of others fulfills the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves.

[20] True almsgiving is the repeated and unselfish giving to others, not according to the abundance that we enjoy, but according to the needs which others endure. To be charitable is an imperative not simply for the rich, but for the poor as well. As Pope St. Leo the Great teaches, "Those who are unequal in their capacity to give can be equal in the love within their hearts" (Sermon 6 *de Quadragesima*, 1-2). Through works of charity, we reintroduce within society those conditions that make for peace.

[21] But, there is much more to our works of generosity than simple philanthropy. Acts of charity conform us more perfectly to the very nature of God. In the practice of doing good for others, we imitate Christ himself who, "though he was rich, yet for [our] sake he became poor, so that [we] through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9).

[22] Through our love of others expressed in

works of charity, we learn to make our lives a total gift to God who identifies with those in need (cf. Mt 25:31-46). As St. John Chrysostom so beautifully says, "Lift up and stretch out your hands, not to heaven but to the poor; for if you stretch out your hands to the poor, you have reached the summit of heaven" (Homily 1 on Second Timothy).

[23] With prayer, fasting and almsgiving throughout the forty days of Lent, we translate into action the ritual act by which we begin this Holy Season. By receiving the imposition of ashes, we accept the reality that we are dust and unto dust we shall return. We acknowledge publicly that we are just passing through this world. But, we also know that our life is more than just a journey that leads us from this world to the next. Already, as we repent and believe the good news, we not only enter the kingdom of God, but we become instruments of God bringing his kingdom about within this world.

[24] Through prayer, our desire to make ourselves the center of the universe dissipates. Through fasting, our worldly detachments that draw us down are broken. Through works of charity, those clouds that darken the vision of others as our brothers and sisters vanish. Purified through the penance of Lent, we ourselves begin to see with even greater clarity the face of God.

[25] After 40 days, when Moses came down the mountain with the Law, God gave the world a small glimpse of his glory. He made Moses' face shine with a brilliant light. The people saw him and were moved by this reflection of God's glory, a glory that soon faded away. But, when Jesus ascended the mountain and gave his Law, he gave us the way to the glory that never fades.

[26] Certainly, in the prayer, fasting and almsgiving that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, he has given a way for us to see with ever greater clarity the face of God in our own lives. But, he has given something more. In us, he has given the world a way to see his presence.

[27] In living the teaching of Jesus, we are changed in the sight of the world. Already, here and now, "we, with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord's glory as we are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18). To a world that, because of its sin, has become blind to what is true, good and beautiful, we are the face of God who is Truth, Goodness and Beauty.

Given at the Pastoral Center of the  
Diocese of Paterson,  
on Ash Wednesday,  
the 22nd of February, 2012.

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