

Pastoral Letter

Lent 2013

*Grant, almighty God, through the yearly observances of holy Lent,
that we may grow in understanding the riches hidden in Christ,
and by worthy conduct, pursue their effects.*

Dear faithful of the Diocese of Timmins, having become your Pastor on December 27th, I want to reflect with you on the season of Lent that will begin soon, in a way that will be a benefit for our personal lives, for the Church and for society. The prayer quoted above is the one that the Church addresses to the Lord on the First Sunday of Lent and it will guide this reflection.

1. In Latin, the word Lent is said *quadragesima*, which means forty. Lent is a period of forty days, a more intense time for the spiritual life. Ash Wednesday speaks of “*this campaign of Christian Service*”, a “*training for spiritual combat*” (see Eph 6:10-20).

The word training is not foreign to our daily life. We see many people training regularly at a gym, with the goal of staying in shape, losing weight or getting back lost flexibility; with this goal in mind, people get up early, cut back on meals or invest in a few evenings for exercise; sometimes the exercises are painful and a diet can be restricting but there is satisfaction in making the effort and in generally feeling better.

Athletes who want to win a medal invest even more energetically: they tirelessly repeat the same exercises to achieve more flexibility, more speed, more strength. Also, students who want to earn a diploma and practice the

profession of their choice modify their schedules, their nights out: they make sure to put in the necessary time for study, for work, they pass more or less stressful exams and carry out the required training period.

In each of these examples one sees a main objective (keep in shape, lose weight, obtain a medal or a diploma); with regard to this objective, one accepts particular exercises and more or less difficult sacrifices. The goal one aims for happens first in the mind and is not visible or tangible; nevertheless, because of it, adjustments are made; without these efforts and sacrifices, the goal will never be achieved.

2- In a similar way, Lent seeks to make our Christian life more consistent. It runs along the lines of the forty days that Moses spent on the mountain before receiving the commandments from God (Ex. 24:18) or those of Elijah (I K.19:8) before his encounter with God on Mount Horeb. It recalls the 40 years that the Hebrew people lived in the

desert, between enslavement in Egypt and entry into the Promised Land. It also reminds us of the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert after his baptism (Mt 4:2), before the beginning of his public life.

To appreciate this special time, the prophet Hosea had a beautiful formula: *“I am going to lure her and lead her out into the wilderness and speak to her heart”* (Hosea 2:16). He proposes to enter into a time that will allow what is essential to be discovered: an intimate relationship with the Lord.

A comparison may shed some light on this: that of a compass. The

needle of a compass points to the magnetic north; once the north is identified, we can locate other key points. However the needle can be diverted by a metal object or by a magnet placed near it; there is a risk of taking the wrong road if we think the compass is still pointing towards the north.

- 3- The specific goal of the Lenten season is to make us regain the focus of our life, the Pole Star, beginning with which, all the rest stands. We are invited to identify the central reality of our lives, our fundamental option, the one according to which we carry out our other choices.

For some, the central reality of life is money, pleasure, power. How many lives have been ruined, how many families broken up, friendly ties lost through the excessive search for money; even health can be affected by it. For money, some exploit others and become insensitive to the poverty that they themselves have often caused or that they might at least relieve. Let us think in this sense about the parable of poor Lazarus and the evil rich man, locked up in his egotistical bubble. (Lk 16: 19-31)

For others, the search for pleasure becomes an obsession. They develop

extreme dependencies on drinking, drugs or sexuality. At the end of this road, they find themselves disappointed by this destructive and artificial paradise that is only a mirage.

Still others are inhabited by a desire for power, a desire for domination over others. They bring about the destruction of everything that gets in their way. The simple reminder of the indescribable devastation brought about by Nazism and Communism suffices to demonstrate the end to which such desires can lead.

- 4- The Lenten season allows us to centre ourselves again on God. Taking the image of the compass again, whose needle is diverted by a magnet, we can be aware of realities that fascinate us to a point that restricts our attention on God; we can appreciate how accurate Saint Augustine was when he wrote: *“O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you”*. *Confessions, 1,1,1: quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 30)*

In this Year of Faith, inaugurated on October 11, 2012 by our Holy Father Benedict XVI, the season of Lent constitutes an excellent opportunity to deepen our connection with the Lord, in order to “grow in understanding the riches hidden in Christ”.

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We can rediscover the true face of God and thereby discover who we are for him and how we can change to become even more in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26). To help us with this, I turn to a homily, brilliant as usual, that the Holy Father pronounced at World Youth Day in Cologne on August 20, 2005.

The Pope was commenting on the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem. Leaving their country to follow the Star, they arrive in the little town where Jesus was born. What occurred there was essential for them, because after their journey, begins what the Pope calls their “interior journey”.

Upon seeing the Child of the Manger, « *they had to change their ideas about power, about God and about man, and in so doing, they also had to change themselves. Now they were able to see that God's power is not like that of the powerful of this world. God's ways are not as we imagine them or as we might wish them to be. God does not*

enter into competition with earthly powers in this world. He does not marshal his divisions alongside other divisions. God did not send 12 legions of angels to assist Jesus in the Garden of Olives (cf. Mt 26: 53). He contrasts the noisy and ostentatious power of this world with the defenceless power of love, which succumbs to death on the Cross and dies ever anew throughout history; yet it is this same love which constitutes the new divine intervention that opposes injustice and ushers in the Kingdom of God. God is different - this is what they now come to realize. And it means that they themselves must now become different, they must learn God's ways... they have to learn that their lives must be conformed to this divine way of exercising power, to God's own way of being. They must become men of truth, of justice, of goodness, of forgiveness, of mercy. They will no longer ask: how can this serve me? Instead, they will have to ask: How can I serve God's presence in the world? They must learn to lose their life and in this way to find it” .

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The encounter with the true face of God changes us. We can “open ourselves to his light through an ever more faithful life”. This is what the Holy Father reminds us of as he continues his reflection; he underlines that this is what happened in the lives of the saints: they have been transformed by him, they became similar to him. « *The saints and the blessed did not doggedly seek their own happiness, but simply wanted to give themselves, because the light of Christ had shown upon them. They show us the way to attain happiness, they show us how to be truly human. Through all the ups and downs of history, they were the true reformers who constantly rescued it from plunging into the valley of darkness; it was they who constantly shed upon it the light that was needed to make sense - even in the midst of suffering - of God's words spoken at the end of the work of creation: "It is very good". ...Only from the saints, only from God does true revolution*

come, the definitive way to change the world. In the last century we experienced revolutions with a common programme - expecting nothing more from God, they assumed total responsibility for the cause of the world in order to change it. And this, as we saw, meant that a human and partial point of view was always taken as an absolute guiding principle. Absolutizing what is not absolute but relative is called totalitarianism. It does not liberate man, but takes away his dignity and enslaves him. It is not ideologies that save the world, but only a return to the living God, our Creator, the guarantor of our freedom, the guarantor of what is really good and true. True revolution consists in simply turning to God who is the measure of what is right and who at the same time is everlasting love. And what could ever save us apart from love. »

Thus, when we enter into real contact with the Lord, we cannot do otherwise than be changed. The Lord offers everything; the response belongs to us. Like a device with endless possibilities: the use depends on us; with the same Internet I can send messages of love or messages of hate; my freedom

makes the choice. God gives abilities to human beings but applying those abilities depends on freedom: the same heart can love or hate; the same hands can wound or heal; everything depends on the meaning given to life; everything depends on the place that God occupies in my mind and in my heart.

7. In this season of Lent, in this Year of Faith, I invite you to enter into the faith of the Church into the mystery of God, to rediscover the face of God, as it was revealed in Jesus, in order to be changed in him, to become more like him. This is possible, first and foremost, through prayer. In this regard, I am proposing a few avenues for you.

1) **Take fifteen minutes each day for personal prayer.**

Prayer is a dialogue with the Lord where we hear his word and where we express our desires to him. These fifteen minutes can be done in the morning, before work, or in the evening, before bedtime. It takes conviction and good discipline to turn off some television programs in order to pray.

- 2) During these fifteen minutes, we can **listen to the Word of God**. We can read one gospel fully (St. Matthew, 28

chapters, St. Mark, 16, St. Luke, 24, or St. John, 21). With a slow reading of each text, we can look at Jesus through the eyes of each evangelist.

- 3) We can also **meditate**. Meditation is a kind of spiritual mastication (“chewing”) similar to what we do when we eat one bite at a time. I suggest one method, easy to use: **Jesus before our eyes, Jesus in our heart, Jesus in our hands**. We look at what Jesus did (his gestures, his words), the

reactions of people to him; we ask Jesus to put his feelings into our hearts; we choose an action that will apply his word during the day.

- 4) In this Year of Faith, we can pray the *Nicene Creed* and recite it slowly during Lent in order to contemplate the mystery of the Holy Trinity.
- 5) We can also read pages from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or the *Compendium*. These two books include four

parts: the content of the faith, the sacraments, God's commandments and prayer. Depending on our concerns, we can also discuss one or other aspect as a couple, as a family or with friends.

- 6) We can also **read** the life of a saint.
- 7) Finally, we can intensify our sacramental life: participate in Holy Mass with more fervour, avail ourselves of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

At the end of this Letter for Lent and the Year of Faith 2013, I want to again invite each one of you, dear members of our Diocese, to take advantage of this liturgical season to intensify our understanding of the Lord, your connection with him; this is how we can be transformed by his grace and become a reflection of his presence in the world. This is the object of my prayer for you and for our Diocesan Church.

*Grant, almighty God, through the yearly observances of holy Lent,
that we may grow in understanding the riches hidden in Christ,
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† Serge Poitras
Bishop of Timmins

Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul

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