



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Lent 2017

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In the Gospel of St. Matthew we are told that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and forty nights and was tempted by the devil. Jesus did this to spiritually prepare for his public ministry. Liturgically, the Church commemorates this significant event by celebrating the season of Lent. As we enter these forty days, we unite ourselves more closely with Christ as a time of spiritual preparation. We embrace the cross so that we will be ready to celebrate His Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Hopefully, as we enter into the 'wilderness' of Lent, we will have more time to pause and reflect as we rid ourselves of unnecessary distractions. We are given a significant period of time, together with traditional practices and powerful symbols, to help us focus our attention on God rather than on ourselves. It seems that we can very easily forget about God. It is sin that causes us to turn inward and focus on the self. Just as Jesus was able to battle satan, we need to fight sin and selfishness. We do this by prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These become the means to victory.

Praying is essential to the spiritual life and this is what Jesus did for forty days in the wilderness. We should make a commitment to spending some time in prayer and meditation each day. The Stations of the Cross and the Rosary are two prayers that are often associated with Lent. Daily Mass is also a beautiful Lenten practice. There are also a number of booklets available that offer a specific scripture verse with a brief meditation for each day of Lent. Make the effort to pray a little more during Lent, especially during this Year of the Rosary. Make a commitment to spend some time each day talking to the Lord, Our Lady and the Saints. Assure them of your love and ask them for their help.

Remembering that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights and was tempted by the devil, teaches us that there is a connection between penance and overcoming sin. For whatever reason, it seems that over the last number of years this connection has been lost. Jesus says that if we want to be His disciples then we need to deny ourselves and take up the cross (Lk. 9:23). This is the essence of penance. So during Lent we deny ourselves through various sacrifices. We say "no" to self so that we can more easily say "yes" to God. The connection between penance and overcoming our sin is expressed most perfectly in the Sacrament of Penance. During Lent we should make a special effort to go to confession. Each time we celebrate this Sacrament we overcome the power of evil. With confidence we can utter the same response as Jesus in the wilderness, "away with you satan!" We will once again have an opportunity to celebrate this Sacrament in all parishes throughout the diocese on Saturday, April 1st, from 10 o'clock in the

morning until 2 o'clock in the afternoon. We should also try to eat more simply during Lent and fast from eating meat on Friday if possible.

Almsgiving is rooted in love and generosity. We see this most perfectly expressed in Jesus who loved us so much that he suffered and died that we might be saved. We respond by giving back to God and to others because we have been given so much. Acts of charity are so important, especially as we try to help those most in need. A tradition that has been associated with almsgiving in Canada is the Share Lent Collection. It is sponsored by the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace which celebrates a significant anniversary this year. Fifty years ago the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops established this organization in response to Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. A significant principle of this document is that development becomes a catalyst for peace. The encyclical states, "When we fight poverty and oppose the unfair conditions of the present, we are not just promoting human well-being; we are also furthering man's spiritual and moral development, and hence we are benefiting the whole human race. For peace is not simply the absence of warfare, based on a precarious balance of power; it is fashioned by efforts directed day after day toward the establishment of the ordered universe willed by God, with a more perfect form of justice among men."(76) In creating this organization, the Bishops of Canada took this simple quote as a guiding principle. We see this in work that has been done by Development and Peace over the past fifty years. It supports partners working in order to improve living conditions in 70 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. It also offers emergency relief for natural disasters throughout the world. I am grateful for all of those who have supported Development and Peace in our Diocese over the past fifty years. Your generosity and commitment have helped many of the world's poor and disadvantaged. Development and Peace continues to work with the Bishops of Canada to ensure that it is a catalyst for peace in a rapidly divided world. It is also an ongoing priority to ensure that all partnerships with outside groups and organizations promote justice, peace and Catholic values.

On Ash Wednesday we receive ashes on our foreheads in the shape of a cross. This acts as a reminder that during the forty days of Lent we need to embrace the cross. We follow the example of Jesus who prayed, fasted, and gave so generously to others. He lovingly embraced the cross so that all could be saved. So our acts of penance should not only be for our conversion, but also for the conversion of the world. This was the message of Our Lady of Fatima who taught the three shepherd children this simple prayer, "Oh my Jesus, I offer this (sacrifices) for love of you, for the conversion of sinners and in reparation for the sins committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary." During this 100th anniversary of the Fatima apparitions, our Lenten penances should take on even greater significance in our diocese as we continue to pray for world peace.

May the forty days of Lent be a time of conversion for each one of us as we embrace the cross. May our prayers, fasting and almsgiving lead to renewal for ourselves, our diocese and the world. St. Catherine of Alexandria, pray for us.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Gerard Bergie". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small cross-like mark at the end.

Most Reverend Gerard Bergie, D.D.
Bishop of St. Catharines