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LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2013

LENT: ENTERING THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS

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

***Grace to you and peace from
God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ***

(Eph 1:2)

[1] A short walk down the hill from Rome's Church of Santa Maria Maggiore is the less imposing and much smaller Church of Santa Pudenziana. Yet, its unimpressive façade conceals a treasure not only of historic and artistic value, but of theological importance as well. The church itself is built over a second-century house belonging to a Roman senator. It is believed to have been the residence of the popes until the Emperor Constantine offered them the Lateran Palace. In the apse of this church, built in the fourth century, there is the oldest Christian mosaic outside of Ravenna.

[2] This mosaic holds a unique place in the history of Christian iconography. Unlike earlier representations of Christ as the Good Shepherd, in this mosaic he is seen as a young man seated on a royal throne. He is robed in a golden toga trimmed in purple and is instructing his followers with imperial authority. Above the image of Christ the Teacher is a large jewel-encrusted cross. This is one of the earliest artistic representations of the Christian understanding of the Cross as a victory over sin and death.

[3] During the first centuries, the cross was rarely seen in Christian art. Christians had no need to depict this gruesome and disgraceful form of execution. They were still being crucified for their faith. Then, with the Emperor Constantine, the persecutions came to an end.

[4] When Constantine's mother, St. Helena, discovered the true cross in Jerusalem, Christians began to depict the cross not as the instrument of Christ's death, but as his triumph over death. The *crux gemata*, that is, the jeweled cross, came into use. It visually represents this theology. On Golgotha, God "disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col 2:15).

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[5] As we begin our Lenten journey, the Church invites us to live more intensely the mystery of the Cross. This is the season of grace meant for us to reproduce within ourselves “the pattern of his death” (cf. *Phil* 3:10). It is the time to renew our own baptism by which “we were indeed buried with him ... into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (*Rm* 6:4).

[6] The life of every Christian is a continual sharing in the cross. It is the daily dying to self as we follow Jesus. In a word, the *via crucis* is the school of Christian life. Rightly did Tertullian designate us Christians as *crucis religiosi*, i.e. “devotees of the Cross” (*Apology*, xvi).

[7] The first way to enter into the mystery of the Cross is by acknowledging that we are indeed sinners and in need of redemption. “All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God” (*Rm* 3:23). Not a popular thought for our day. Our society relativizes the moral norm. The standard of God’s law and will for our good have been replaced with values of our own making. With the overthrow of moral norms has come the denial that anything can be intrinsically evil. Hence, in the eyes of many, there is no sin.

[8] Furthermore, our secular society increasingly espouses a humanism that leaves no room for God. Once the truth of God as the origin and end of the human person is lost, our actions are seen only in terms of one another. If there is sin, it is not an offense against God, but simply what offends man. Thus, sin is emptied of its meaning as a rupture in our relationship with God and conscience is deadened. (cf. Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, 17-18)

[9] All of us have gone astray. Our sins separate us from God. By our own efforts, we cannot repair the damage or bridge the separation. But what we cannot do for ourselves, God has done for us. As St. Paul teaches, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (*Rm* 5:8). On the Cross, Jesus took our sins upon himself (cf. *Is* 53:6) and “God was [there] reconciling the world to himself (2 *Cor* 5:19). Thus, when we confess our sins, we claim Christ as our Savior and enter into the mystery of the Cross. What better way to do this than to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation not only during Lent, but on a regular basis during the entire year!

[10] The mere fact that we have been baptized does not remove us from a daily struggle with evil. After his own baptism in the Jordan, Jesus “was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, to be tempted by the devil” (*Lk* 4:1-2). Jesus’ own struggle with the Evil One for forty days and forty nights dramatically reminds us of our constant struggle against evil.

[11] Intrinsic to the Christian life is this continual turning from evil to do God’s will. In our weakness, this is always a struggle. Our life is a battle “ ‘against the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world’ (*Eph* 6:12), in which the devil is at work and never tires — even today — of tempting whoever wishes to draw close to the Lord...” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Lenten Message*, 2011).

[12] Paul speaks of the common experience of all Christians who want to please God and are still tempted to please themselves instead. With Paul, each of us can say, “I am carnal, sold into slavery to sin...For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate....The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not...” (*Rm* 7:14-19). We struggle with evil and in our weakness we succumb at times. As Proverbs teaches, “the just man falls seven times a day” (*Prov* 24:16). But, the same Scripture also says, “he rises again.” Hence, our Lenten discipline: to rise again.

[13] When we confess our sins, we repeat the words of the prodigal son, “I will arise and go to my Father” (*Lk* 15:18). In fact, our sincere acknowledgement of our sins is already a gift of the Holy Spirit working within us. As Paul teaches, even our ability to will the good is God’s working in us (cf. *Phil* 2:13). The moment we are able to say with heartfelt contrition “Father, I have sinned” is the moment that we place ourselves with Christ on the cross. And, “It is in the paschal mystery, the heart of the Church, that [we receive] the gift of the forgiveness of sins and the joy of being born again to eternal life” (Pope John Paul II, *General Audience*, February 17, 1999).

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[14] To help repeat the pattern of his death and rise again in every aspect of our lives, the Church calls us not simply to confess our sins, but to engage in the discipline of Lent. She places before us three practices that Jesus encouraged in the Sermon on the Mount. She shows us that, in prayer, fasting and almsgiving, we have a way to die to sin and to rise to new life.

[15] First, prayer. Prayer is always our response to God who speaks to us. In our baptism, God says to each of us, “You are my beloved child in whom I am well-pleased.” He becomes our Father and we, his adopted sons and daughters. He longs for us to grow in our relationship! A Jewish midrash on Psalm 65 says “Men’s ears become satisfied with hearing but God’s ears are never satisfied, He is never wearied by men’s prayers.” God is always eager to listen.

[16] Jesus himself valued the place of prayer in his relationship to the Father. Often before dawn, or late in the evening, he would withdraw to a solitary place to enter into deeper communion with the Father. Seeing the importance that Jesus placed on prayer, the disciples asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (*Lk* 11:1).

[17] Jesus responded to them by teaching the *Our Father*. The *Our Father* is the perfect prayer. It is the model of all prayer. It praises God who is worthy of all adoration. It teaches us to be unselfish in offering ourselves entirely to God. It begs from his goodness what is best not merely for ourselves, but for our neighbor. During Lent, we will do well not merely to say the *Our Father*, but to pray it slowly, quietly drawing from it the inspiration for all our prayer.

[18] Lent is a time to grow in our life of prayer. Whether we use the words of traditional prayers (such as the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*, the *Glory Be*) or whether we use our own words (pouring out our needs or praising and thanking God for his gifts), all prayer is a conversation by which we enter into an intimate communion with the God who loves us. Sometimes that communion is expressed in words. Other times, it is experienced in silence.

[19] To develop a strong prayer life, we need to learn how to be quiet and silent. Unfortunately, noise is a constant companion in our lives today. Cell phones and other people’s conversations have become a soundtrack to our daily routines. Rare are the moments when we are comfortable with quiet. Yet, by remaining silent in the presence of God, we create that space in which God can speak more clearly to us and we can listen in love. As St. Augustine teaches, *Verbo crescente, verba deficient*: “when the Word of God increases, the words of men fail” (*Sermo*, 288, 5).

[20] All prayer, whether in words or silence, is thus an encounter with God. But the most privileged and sacred encounter that we have with God comes in the Eucharist. On the Cross, Jesus made a perfect offering of Himself. In every Eucharist, we are with Christ on Golgotha. We are one with him in the gift of self to the Father. Our participation in Mass not only offers us our daily bread who is Christ himself, but opens us to all our brothers and sisters who are one with the Lord. The more we recognize the infinite value of the Mass as the Sacrifice of the Cross and our sharing in it, the more readily we find the way to attend Mass as often as possible, even daily.

[21] Second, not just prayer, but fasting opens a way for us to enter the mystery of the Cross. On the cross, Jesus “humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (*Phil* 2:8). Fasting is the school of obedience. When we fast, we refrain from something good for the sake of something better. By saying “no” to a legitimate and wholesome pleasure, whether food or entertainment, we strengthen our human will to give a quicker and more spontaneous “yes” to God’s will.

[22] When God created Adam and Eve, his design was for them to use their freedom and to choose the good. When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he willed them to grow in the way of perfection. And, so, even before original sin, God laid down the law of fasting. He prohibited Adam and Eve from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (cf. *Gen* 2:16-17). He allowed them to eat of every other tree in the garden. But, to teach them to discipline their wills and perfect their human freedom,

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he commanded them to fast from that one tree.

[23] If fasting was necessary even in Paradise, how much more imperative it is now that we have lost Paradise by our sins. According to St. Leo the Great, “fasting gives strength against sin, represses evil desires, repels temptation, humbles pride, cools anger, and fosters all the inclinations of a good will, even unto the practice of every virtue.” If Jesus who never sinned fasted, how much more should we who sin again and again.

[24] Third, we enter the mystery of the Cross through our almsgiving. The Cross is Christ’s total gift of self to the Father for others. Through our almsgiving, we give ourselves to God present among us in those in need. Almsgiving is the antidote to self-centeredness. Centering on our own needs and pleasures, we drift apart from others. Eventually, we can become blind, even to those who go without the basic necessities. Lazarus may lie on our doorstep, but the pleasures of our table keep us from meeting his needs. Almsgiving is the remedy to the ill of placing our own desires before the needs of others (cf. *Mt* 25: 31-46).

[25] Almsgiving is not simply taking something from our pockets and depositing it into the hands of others. True almsgiving includes all our works of charity by which we seek to lift up our brothers and sisters from both material and spiritual poverty. “The works of mercy are innumerable... In the matter of almsgiving not only the rich and affluent but also those of average means and the poor are able to play their part. Those who are unequal in their capacity to give can be equal in the love within their hearts” (St. Leo the Great, *Sermo 6 de Quadragesima*, 1-2).

[26] This Lent, by confessing our sins, by more prayer, fasting and almsgiving, may we truly enter into the mystery of the Cross. It is through the daily renewal of the grace of our baptism, whereby we were joined with Christ in his dying, that we prepare ourselves to celebrate Christ’s Resurrection not only on the Feast of Easter but in the Father’s house where there is always rejoicing (cf. *Lk* 15:25).

*Given at the Pastoral Center of the
Diocese of Paterson, on Ash Wednesday,
the 13th of February, 2013.*

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