



THE DIOCESE OF KALAMAZOO
Office of the Bishop

February 11, 2017

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

May the grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you!

With the annual Season of Lent upon us, I take this occasion to write to you today to encourage all of us to embrace these coming 40 days as a grace-filled opportunity to grow in our love for God and for one another.

As I am sure we are already aware, Ash Wednesday this year falls on St. Valentine's Day, a celebration that is centered on the love that we share with those special people in our lives, and is characterized by the human heart -- the symbol of human love. Since Ash Wednesday always takes precedence, and because it is a day of universal fast and abstinence in the Church, we may have to transfer our traditional ways of celebrating St. Valentine's Day (chocolate, cakes, candy) to some other day. However, the image of the heart, which St. Valentine poured out in love for Jesus, remains quite appropriate for the theme of Ash Wednesday since we are called to a "change of heart" and to a time of "conversion". As our foreheads are marked with ashes in the form of a cross, we will hear the instruction to once again: "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel" or to "Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return". These words invite us to change our hearts, so we may we not be "hard-hearted" or have "hearts of stone", but rather that we may have hearts that are warmed by God's love---hearts that are full of compassion for those in need. As Pope Francis writes in his Lenten Message for this year: "Lent summons us, and enables us, to come back to the Lord wholeheartedly and in every aspect of our lives."

This year in particular, there seems to be ever-widening divisions, pervasive negativity, and a lack of civil discourse among people in general. For that reason, Lent provides us as People of Faith with a wonderful opportunity to focus on the virtue of hope in God's mercy, and to consciously resolve to find ways to rise above the rancor and the argumentation by choosing to reach out to others in our lives with the love of Jesus in our hearts.

This Lenten Season, may we resolve to pray, to fast, and to do works of charity in ways that can truly "change our hearts". Through our resolutions to **pray**, may we grow closer to Jesus in setting aside each day a minimum of five to ten minutes of quiet time to spend with the Lord, asking for the grace to be His instruments of peace and unity. Through our resolutions to **fast**, may we fast from negativity, mean-spiritedness and gossip, replacing them with kindness, compassion, and words of encouragement to others in our lives. Through our resolutions to **give alms/do works of charity**, may we find ways each day to practice one or two of the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy in a spirit of true love and compassion. The Season of Lent is also the appropriate time to cleanse our hearts from sin by receiving the Sacrament of Penance to personally experience God's gift of mercy, an expression of His unconditional love. Our diocesan observance of "24 Hours for the Lord" (March 9-10) will provide a special opportunity to receive this sacrament during a 24-hour period of Eucharistic Adoration, in union with Dioceses around the world.

Let us heed Pope Francis' invitation to: "take up the Lenten journey with enthusiasm, sustained by prayer, fasting and almsgiving. If at times the flame of charity seems to die in our own hearts, know that this is never the case in the heart of God. He constantly gives us a chance to begin loving anew."

My dear Family of Faith, let us embrace this Holy Lenten Season in the hope that we will celebrate Easter renewed in our Loving God's unconditional love for us, demonstrated so clearly in Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection for the salvation of the world. May these 40 days of Lent truly change our hearts and, in the process, help to renew the world.

Assuring you of my heart-felt prayers for you, and asking for your prayers for me, I remain

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Most Rev. Paul J. Bradley
Bishop of Kalamazoo