Pope’s Message for Lent 2015: “Make your hearts firm”

Vatican City, 27 January 2015 (VIS) – The following is the full text of the Holy Father Francis’ message for Lent 2015, entitled “Make your hearts firm”. The document was signed in the Vatican on 4 October 2014, the festivity of St. Francis of Assisi.

“Lent is a time of renewal for the whole Church, for each communities and every believer. Above all it is a ‘time of grace’. God does not ask of us anything that he himself has not first given us. ‘We love because he first has loved us’. He is not aloof from us. Each one of us has a place in his heart. He knows us by name, he cares for us and he seeks us out whenever we turn away from him. He is interested in each of us; his love does not allow him to be indifferent to what happens to us. Usually, when we are healthy and comfortable, we forget about others (something God the Father never does): we are unconcerned with their problems, their sufferings and the injustices they endure. Our heart grows cold. As long as I am relatively healthy and comfortable, I do not think about those less well off. Today, this selfish attitude of indifference has taken on global proportions, to the extent that we can speak of a globalisation of indifference. It is a problem which we, as Christians, need to confront.

When the people of God are converted to his love, they find answers to the questions that history continually raises. One of the most urgent challenges which I would like to address in this Message is precisely the globalisation of indifference.

Indifference to our neighbour and to God also represents a real temptation for us Christians. Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience.

God is not indifferent to our world; he so loves it that he gave his Son for our salvation. In the Incarnation, in the earthly life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, the gate between God and man, between heaven and earth, opens once for all. The Church is like the hand holding open this gate, thanks to her proclamation of God’s word, her celebration of the sacraments and her witness of the faith which works through love. But the world tends to withdraw into itself and shut that door through which God comes into the world and the world comes to him. Hence the hand, which is the Church, must never be surprised if it is rejected, crushed and wounded.

God’s people, then, need this interior renewal, lest we become indifferent and withdraw into ourselves. To further this renewal, I would like to propose for our reflection three biblical texts.

1. 'If one member suffers, all suffer together’ – The Church

The love of God breaks through that fatal withdrawal into ourselves which is indifference. The Church offers us this love of God by her teaching and especially by her witness. But we can only bear witness to what we ourselves have experienced. Christians are those who let God clothe them with goodness and mercy, with Christ, so as to become, like Christ,
servants of God and others. This is clearly seen in the liturgy of Holy Thursday, with its rite of the washing of feet. Peter did not want Jesus to wash his feet, but he came to realise that Jesus does not wish to be just an example of how we should wash one another's feet. Only those who have first allowed Jesus to wash their own feet can then offer this service to others. Only they have 'a part' with him and thus can serve others.

Lent is a favourable time for letting Christ serve us so that we in turn may become more like him. This happens whenever we hear the word of God and receive the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. There we become what we receive: the Body of Christ. In this body there is no room for the indifference which so often seems to possess our hearts. For whoever is of Christ, belongs to one body, and in him we cannot be indifferent to one another. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honoured, all the parts share its joy.

The Church is the communio sanctorum not only because of her saints, but also because she is a communion in holy things: the love of God revealed to us in Christ and all his gifts. Among these gifts there is also the response of those who let themselves be touched by this love. In this communion of saints, in this sharing in holy things, no one possesses anything alone, but shares everything with others. And since we are united in God, we can do something for those who are far distant, those whom we could never reach on our own, because with them and for them, we ask God that all of us may be open to his plan of salvation.

2. 'Where is your brother?' – Parishes and Communities

All that we have been saying about the universal Church must now be applied to the life of our parishes and communities. Do these ecclesial structures enable us to experience being part of one body? A body which receives and shares what God wishes to give? A body which acknowledges and cares for its weakest, poorest and most insignificant members? Or do we take refuge in a universal love that would embrace the whole world, while failing to see the Lazarus sitting before our closed doors?

In order to receive what God gives us and to make it bear abundant fruit, we need to press beyond the boundaries of the visible Church in two ways.

In the first place, by uniting ourselves in prayer with the Church in heaven. The prayers of the Church on earth establish a communion of mutual service and goodness which reaches up into the sight of God. Together with the saints who have found their fulfilment in God, we form part of that communion in which indifference is conquered by love. The Church in heaven is not triumphant because she has turned her back on the sufferings of the world and rejoices in splendid isolation. Rather, the saints already joyfully contemplate the fact that, through Jesus' death and resurrection, they have triumphed once and for all over indifference, hardness of heart and hatred. Until this victory of love penetrates the whole world, the saints continue to accompany us on our pilgrim way. Saint Therese of Lisieux, a Doctor of the Church, expressed her conviction that the joy in heaven for the victory of crucified love remains incomplete as long as there is still a single man or woman on earth
who suffers and cries out in pain: 'I trust fully that I shall not remain idle in heaven; my desire is to continue to work for the Church and for souls'.

We share in the merits and joy of the saints, even as they share in our struggles and our longing for peace and reconciliation. Their joy in the victory of the Risen Christ gives us strength as we strive to overcome our indifference and hardness of heart.

In the second place, every Christian community is called to go out of itself and to be engaged in the life of the greater society of which it is a part, especially with the poor and those who are far away. The Church is missionary by her very nature; she is not self-enclosed but sent out to every nation and people.

Her mission is to bear patient witness to the One who desires to draw all creation and every man and woman to the Father. Her mission is to bring to all a love which cannot remain silent. The Church follows Jesus Christ along the paths that lead to every man and woman, to the very ends of the earth. In each of our neighbours, then, we must see a brother or sister for whom Christ died and rose again. What we ourselves have received, we have received for them as well. Similarly, all that our brothers and sisters possess is a gift for the Church and for all humanity.

Dear brothers and sisters, how greatly I desire that all those places where the Church is present, especially our parishes and our communities, may become islands of mercy in the midst of the sea of indifference!

3. 'Make your hearts firm!' – Individual Christians

As individuals too, we have are tempted by indifference. Flooded with news reports and troubling images of human suffering, we often feel our complete inability to help. What can we do to avoid being caught up in this spiral of distress and powerlessness?

First, we can pray in communion with the Church on earth and in heaven. Let us not underestimate the power of so many voices united in prayer! The '24 Hours for the Lord' initiative, which I hope will be observed on 13-14 March throughout the Church, also at the diocesan level, is meant to be a sign of this need for prayer.

Second, we can help by acts of charity, reaching out to both those near and far through the Church’s many charitable organisations. Lent is a favourable time for showing this concern for others by small yet concrete signs of our belonging to the one human family.

Third, the suffering of others is a call to conversion, since their need reminds me of the uncertainty of my own life and my dependence on God and my brothers and sisters. If we humbly implore God’s grace and accept our own limitations, we will trust in the infinite possibilities which God’s love holds out to us. We will also be able to resist the diabolical temptation of thinking that by our own efforts we can save the world and ourselves.

As a way of overcoming indifference and our pretensions to self-sufficiency, I would invite
everyone to live this Lent as an opportunity for engaging in what Benedict XVI called a formation of the heart. A merciful heart does not mean a weak heart. Anyone who wishes to be merciful must have a strong and steadfast heart, closed to the tempter but open to God. A heart which lets itself be pierced by the Spirit so as to bring love along the roads that lead to our brothers and sisters. And, ultimately, a poor heart, one which realises its own poverty and gives itself freely for others.

During this Lent, then, brothers and sisters, let us all ask the Lord: ‘Fac cor nostrum secundum cor tuum’: Make our hearts like yours (Litany of the Sacred Heart of Jesus). In this way we will receive a heart which is firm and merciful, attentive and generous, a heart which is not closed, indifferent or prey to the globalisation of indifference.

It is my prayerful hope that this Lent will prove spiritually fruitful for each believer and every ecclesial community. I ask all of you to pray for me. May the Lord bless you and Our Lady keep you”.

**Indifference, key theme of the Pope's Message for Lent 2015**

Vatican City, 27 January 2015 (VIS) – A press conference was held in the Holy See Press Office this morning, during which Msgr. Giampietro Dal Toso, secretary of the Pontifical Council “Cor Unum”, presented the Pope's Message for Lent 2015, explaining that its central theme is indifference, an issue that the Holy Father has touched upon on a number of occasions. In addition, in his speech to the UN last September Cardinal Secretary of State Parolin emphasised “widespread indifference”, which he equated with an “apathy” that is at times even “synonymous with irresponsibility”.

Indifference is, therefore, “an important concept to explain the different phenomena of the modern world. In this way, we can understand this same concept, including it in what is surely a partial interpretation of a certain culture. Indifference comes from a lack of difference, from a lack of attention to the difference. This can be applied at least on three levels”.

“At the interpersonal level, the play on words between difference and indifference is perhaps more easily understood. On the one hand, the difference is stressed in order to provoke a separation. On the other hand, a lack of attention to the difference between the other and myself conforms the other to one’s own parameters and thus annihilates him”.

“At the cultural level, that is, in the everyday environment that helps shape our thoughts and judgement, I seem to notice an indifference to values. This is not only related to a lack of awareness of values or an incomplete observance of values; it is above all a lack of judgement on values. In this way, every choice becomes interchangeable, every option becomes viable, any assessment on good and evil, truth and falsity becomes useless. If there is no difference, everything is the same and is therefore not permissible for anyone to propose something that is more or less appropriate to a person’s nature. In my opinion, global uniformity, the lowering of the standards of values that comes from the lack of difference is linked to the experience of many of our contemporaries of a lack of meaning. If
everything is the same, if nothing is different and everything is therefore more or less valid, in what can one invest one’s life? If everything is the same, it means that nothing really has value and therefore it means nothing fully deserves our gift”.

“We then come to a third level, that more specifically regards metaphysical principles. Here lies the greatest indifference, the largest and most consequential form of the lack of attention to difference, that is: indifference towards God and as a result, a lack of attention to the difference between the Creator and creature, which causes so much harm to modern man as it leads him to believe that he is God, while he must continually push against his own limitations”.

Msgr. Dal Toso went on to consider the globalisation of indifference not merely as a geographical phenomenon, but also a cultural one. As it spreads, a Western concept of the world, or Weltanschauung, prevails, linked not only to relationships but also as an existential attitude. The Church does not denounce certain situations simply in order to censure them but instead to offer paths towards healing. For this reason, the Lenten season is always a time of conversion, change and renewal. It is a time for overcoming this globalisation of indifference and entering into a new phase in which we recognise the difference between the self and the other, between one lifestyle and another, between oneself and God. This year’s Lenten Message presents three areas in which indifference must be overcome: the Church, the community and the individual”.

He continued, “Pope Francis speaks about the necessary conversion and the new heart that can beat within us. The key step in all social reconstruction and cultural renewal is change in the individual. The Gospel provides the keys for achieving this change in the person, which then affects the whole social fabric”. However, he warns, “conversion does not have its purpose in a better society, but in the knowledge of Christ and in becoming like Him. Therefore, as we can see in Pope Francis’ Magisterium, he calls us to go beyond a faith that serves only to care for oneself and one’s own well being. Indifference stems from an attitude to life in which otherness does not make a difference and so each person withdraws into himself. Faith also can become instrumental in this search for self”. Our path, he explained, is must therefore take us further, “beyond ourselves”, so that we “live our faith by looking at Christ and in Him we find the Father and brothers and sisters who await us”.

Indifference must also be overcome in Christian communities, which are required to be “islands of mercy in a world dominated by the globalisation of indifference. There is a distinction between the Church and the world, between the heavenly city and the earthly city, a distinction which become increasingly evident. Our Christian places – parishes, communities and groups – must be transformed into places that manifest God’s mercy. Faced with this globalisation of indifference, some might be discouraged as it seems as if nothing can be changed, since we are part of a great social and economic process that is beyond us. Instead, this is not the case. The Christian community can already overcome this indifference, it can show the world that one can live differently and that it can become the city on the mount mentioned in the Gospel. Beginning with this Lent season, Christian community life, where one lives for the other, can be not merely a chimera but instead a living reality; rather than a distant dream, a living sign of the presence of God’s mercy in
Finally, the third level is the Church in her global reality. “Unfortunately”, remarked Msgr. Del Toso, “we tend to see the Church only as an institution and a structure. Instead, she is the living body of those who believe in Christ. It is the Church in her entirety that needs to be renewed. As a body, she shows that she is really alive because she changes, grows and develops. In this body, the members take care of each other”.

Finally, the prelate recalled that “Cor Unum” has always acted as an “instrument of the Pope's proximity to the least of our brothers and sisters”, offering three examples. First, he mentioned the recent joint meeting with the Pontifical Commission for Latin America and the various other entities involved in the reconstruction of Haiti, during which the balance of the financial aid raised by the Catholic Church's for the island during the five years since the earthquake, estimated at 21.5 million dollars, was presented. He also referred to the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq, “where the great victims of these wars are the people, especially the most vulnerable minorities such as Christians who again have become the 'cards' with which those in power play”. Finally, he remarked on the Pope's recent trip to the Philippines, where it could be seen what it means to “'make hearts firm' where there is nothing left to hope for”. In Tacloban, the area visited by the Pope, “Cor Unum” has built large community centre named after Pope Francis, to care for the young and the elderly. He concluded, “Our Dicastery wishes to be a great global expression of what it means for the Church to be a body in which each member can experience the love of the other”.