



11 February 2021

Lenten Pastoral Letter 2021

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I think it would be true to say that for most of us the first few months of 2021 have been far more challenging than we had hoped or expected. Along with the rest of the country, and indeed the whole world, we have continued the struggle against the Covid-19 pandemic. Here on the outskirts of Perth we have experienced the horror of the bushfires which have caused so much distress to so many people. In the north of the State many people were badly impacted by the recent floods. And, of course, in our daily lives and in our lives as a community we continue to grapple with so many social problems, not least of which is the pressing problem of homelessness.

The difficult realities we face can threaten to overwhelm us but they can also be a reminder to us of how much we need God. As the illusion that we are in control of our destiny is swept away with the floods and the fires, the reassurance of our faith that we are not alone and that *“the Lord is close to all who call upon him”* (Psalm 145:18) can give us hope and strength for what lies ahead. As we begin once again the Lenten journey towards the joy of Easter I hope the following few reflections can help us approach the next six weeks with openness to God’s presence in our lives.

Some years ago, while still an auxiliary bishop in Melbourne, I was asked to speak to a group of parents whose children were being prepared for the Sacrament of Confirmation. As part of my talk I stressed the importance of the connection between Baptism and Confirmation. I pointed out that, prior to being anointed with the Oil of Chrism, the Confirmation candidates would be asked to renew their baptismal promises, which for most of them had initially been made on their behalf by their parents. I explained to the parents that being set free from original sin is one essential element of the Sacrament of Baptism, and that the renunciation, the turning of one’s back, on sin itself is part of the renewal of the baptismal promises. Neither Baptism nor Confirmation make sense without them.

During the refreshments afterwards I spoke personally with a number of parents. One of them expressed his surprise that I had mentioned original sin. “Surely,” he said, “we don’t believe in that kind of thing anymore, do we?”.

The answer, of course, is that we do indeed believe both in original sin and in the destructive power of sin in our daily lives. This is part of our Catholic faith and also part of our daily experience. Saint John Henry Newman, one of the great saints of modern times, wrote on one occasion that of all the teachings of the Church the teaching on original sin is the one



most easily verified by human experience. We only have to look around us to see both the beauty of our world and, at the same time, the alarming capacity we have as human beings to disfigure our world and, in particular, to attack, disfigure and sometimes even destroy the dignity of other human beings. In doing so, of course, we can also disfigure and even destroy ourselves.

At the very heart of the Church's teaching on original sin is the fundamental truth that sin enters the world, and is active in the world, not through God's doing but through our own doing. The Book of Genesis tells us that everything God made is good and that human beings are very good (see Genesis 1:1-31). But in the story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:5-3:24) we encounter the great mystery of evil. From the very beginnings of human history human beings have not lived in fidelity to God's creative intention. Made in the image of God, a communion of self-giving and life-giving love, we instead often find ourselves living lives of self-centredness, of isolation, and even of cruelty. How often do our words and our silences, our actions and lack of action, diminish rather than enhance the lives of others? This is the reality we encounter each day in ourselves and in others. It is the reality of sin.

This dark truth of our human story, itself the ongoing consequence of original sin, is of course eclipsed by the bright light of salvation which comes to us in Jesus Christ. Sin is real and powerful but grace is more powerful still. Saint Paul reflects on this when he speaks about the struggle that goes on within him. *"I do not do the good I want,"* he writes, *"but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that lives within me"* (Romans 7:19-20). This terrible dilemma troubles Saint Paul deeply, until, at the end of his reflections, he realises that it is Jesus Christ who can set him free. *"Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?"* he asks. As the answer to his question comes to him he cries out in joy, *"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Romans 7:24).

Lent is a time when we are all invited, and challenged, to recognise that, like Saint Paul, we too have a battle raging within us that so often leads us to be much less than God has created us and is calling us to be. For many Christian thinkers across the centuries, beginning with Saint Augustine, this lack of harmony between where God is calling us and where we find ourselves at any given time, is powerfully captured in the idea of the human person as curved in on him or herself. It is as if we are caught in a destructive pattern of looking inward and focusing on our own selfish and often destructive desires rather than looking outward and focusing on the needs of others.

Experience teaches us that living this kind of self-centred life may bring us momentary satisfaction but it does not bring us deep or lasting happiness. There is something within us that calls us to a more generous, more noble, more truly human way of living. In our best moments, which may be few or many, we recognise that this is both what God wants for us and what we want for ourselves. It is important that we acknowledge this and also acknowledge that this is often precisely how we do live our lives. For this we can be profoundly grateful to God whose grace has enabled us to live lives of generosity, compassion and integrity. There is so much good in every human person and it is only rarely that the power of sin so overwhelms a person that he or she completely loses touch with that seed of goodness which was planted in us at the very beginning of our lives. *"God saw all that he had made and found it very good"* (Genesis 1:31).



It is this mysterious mix of good and evil, of noble intentions and ignoble actions, of high ideals not realised in reality, that the season of Lent allows us to confront and address, and to do so not in despair or self-condemnation but in hope and trusting faith.

If we adopt, as an image of sin, a person bent over him or herself in such a way as to be unable to look outwards, the six weeks of Lent offer us an opportunity to allow God to heal us of our infirmity and allow us to stand straight and tall. In our Catholic tradition the three main ways in which we open ourselves to God's healing power are through our prayer, our fasting and our alms-giving. These are, in a sense, the exercises to which we need to be faithful each day if we are to remain upright rather than slowly deteriorate and find that we are once again curving in on ourselves. They are the divinely prescribed remedies which can keep us strong and true.

When our prayer is genuine it is anything but a turning-in on ourselves. On the contrary, it is an active and deliberate opening of ourselves to God. We consciously acknowledge that we are in God's presence and like the prophets and psalmists of old we say to God, *"Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will"* (Psalm 40:7); *"Speak, Lord, your servant is listening"* (1 Samuel 3:10). And then we wait in trusting faith, knowing that God will speak to us in that moment of prayer or at some other time and in some other way once the moment of prayer has passed. Perhaps, like Mary the Mother of the Lord, we ponder over the events of our life (see Luke 2:19), asking the Lord to help us recognise his presence and guiding hand in our life's journey. Or perhaps like Saint Peter, who as he walked across the water towards Jesus took his eyes off the Lord for a moment and began to sink (see Matthew 14:30), we cry out in fear and in faith, *"Lord, save me, I am going under"*. Whatever form our prayer takes at any particular moment, the secret is this: we have shifted our gaze from ourselves to God. We are looking up and looking out instead of looking down, and just as he did for Peter, Jesus stretches out his hand and lifts us up.

When our fasting is genuine it, too, is anything but a turning-in on ourselves. It is in fact the very opposite, for fasting creates spaces in our lives for new things to happen: it creates space in our lives and in our hearts for God to act. We can fast from food or drink, from television or social media, from unnecessary expenditure on "stuff", from gossip or unwarranted criticism of others, or from many other things. Fasting is a way of going into the desert where we have a chance to meet God in ways that we might never otherwise have. God led the Chosen People through the desert to the Promised Land. The inner desert we create through our fasting will also be the pathway to the joy of Easter and the risen life.

When our alms-giving is genuine it, too, is a powerful remedy against the disease of sinful self-concern, and it can take many forms. We can donate generously to Project Compassion or to some other cause which is dear to our hearts. We can identify people in our circle of family or friends who are struggling or suffering in some way and reach out to them. We can spend more time with our wife or husband, our children or our parents. In a myriad of ways we can respond to the advice Saint Mary McKillop once gave to her sisters: *"Never see a need without doing something about it"*. In doing all this we can be confident that when we pass through the gates of death and come before the Lord he will be able to say to us: *"Whenever you did this to one of the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me"* (Matthew 25:40).



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If during the coming six weeks of Lent we can find the courage and humility to acknowledge that we are, indeed, sinful people, and that our sinfulness is not something trivial but rather, because of its destructive effects on others and on ourselves, something very serious, then we will have begun the journey towards a true celebration of Easter. And if over these same six weeks, by our openness to God's grace, our faith is strengthened and deepened so that we truly understand and believe that the greatness of our sins is absolutely eclipsed by the incredible love, compassion and forgiveness of the Lord, then as Easter comes we will know what it means to have died with Christ and risen with him. If through our prayers, our fasting and our alms-giving we have allowed the Lord to help us stand straight, with eyes fixed on him and therefore also on those he loves, we will know what Jesus meant when he said to his disciples, *"I have come that they might have life and have it to the full"* (John 10:10).

When God created humanity he saw that we were, and are, indeed very good. God wants to restore, and deepen that goodness, in us. God wants to unite us more closely with Christ, who is our life. May this Lent be a holy time, a time of growth, a time of renewal and hope for us all.

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