



# CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

## Pastoral Letter: Lent

*Archbishop George Stack, Cardiff*

THE EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR 2 MARCH 2014

Dear Brothers and Sisters

On March 13th we shall celebrate the first anniversary of the election of Pope Francis as Bishop of Rome. What an extraordinary year it has been! He has made an impact not only on the Catholic Church but on the wider world, reaching out to all men and women of goodwill. In gestures, words and actions he has conveyed the gospel message of his patron Francis: the poor have a unique place in the heart of God.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Holy Season of Lent. Our churches will be crowded for the blessing and distribution of ashes. Pope Francis continually reminds us that words and symbols which do not result in action are simply empty gestures, perhaps pure emotion, maybe even nostalgia. Conversion, turning back to God, lies at the heart of the Christian life. The words which accompany the ashes ceremony are both a comfort and a challenge. "Remember you are dust". "Repent, believe in the gospel". Those words contain the meaning of Lent.

In his first Lenten message, Pope Francis spells out what this conversion means. He tells us that Jesus became poor for our sake. He emptied Himself and became human so that we might experience divine life in this world and the next. The life of prayer, the life of grace, and the sacramental life. Each of these expresses our sharing in Christ's life. That is why during Lent we are called to deepen the ways in which we enter the mystery of how and why God shares his life with us. Stations of the Cross, Lenten devotions, spiritual reading, daily Mass. They all help us to "do something for Lent".

But another great theme of the teaching of Pope Francis is expressed during Lent. It is that we become more truly like Jesus if we are not preoccupied or identified with material possessions. We become poor, like him, by living in solidarity with those who are deprived of the good which they deserve. We become poor when we trust in God. Fasting and Abstinence, Lenten Alms, giving to charity. These are not optional extras for the follower of Jesus. They are the very condition of being his disciple. "The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord....." (Psalm 34) By placing the ashes on our foreheads we undertake to confront the injustice of poverty and suffering. The work which goes on in our parishes to care for those who are in material and spiritual poverty depends on every member of the Church. We are all parts of the one Body of Christ. That is one reason why I ask once again that Lenten Alms are collected in parishes and sent to the Diocese so that we may help those who are in need.

In addition to the economic challenges we still face, it is the poverty of spirit which haunts so much of 21st century life. Isolation, loneliness, individualism and depression. These are familiar realities not just in the world beyond us, but often in our own world too. Reaching out in compassion to a lonely neighbour, to the bereaved, to a family needing support or someone suffering. This is giving the precious gift of time during the season of Lent.

Spiritual poverty is part of the reality which our society faces too. The need to forgive and be forgiven lies at the heart not just of the spiritual life but of the whole of human life. Forgiveness is something we all need.

Every one of us carries burdens and has things that trouble us, and also things that we regret. As Lent begins, receive and know that in a special way the 'Light is On' for you in many of our churches throughout

the Diocese. It offers a space to speak to God heart to heart, to seek his healing and help, and to get off your chest anything that you'd like to be forgiven. Priests will be present in churches to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, also called Confession.

It might be that you were baptised Catholic but for different reasons, no longer or rarely practice your faith. Come along. Everyone is very welcome and no one will judge you. We are all journeying to God's Light in our own way, at our own pace. It is a way of starting afresh, healed by the power of God's love and mercy.

Confession is one of the gifts of love and healing that is offered by the Church. Through it God's forgiveness and mercy are celebrated when we turn to him and present our brokenness, shortfalls and failings. No one is perfect and we all need the Sacrament of Reconciliation to strengthen and renew us. This Lent make this the gift you seek for yourself. The Light of Christ is waiting to heal and enliven your heart once again. The Sacrament of Reconciliation gives this assurance of forgiveness. It reminds us, in the words of Pope Francis "...that God never tires of forgiving us, and through the ministry of a priest offers us an embrace that regenerates us and allows us to continue on our journey"

Each Wednesday of Lent, starting on 12th March until 16th April, many parish churches in the Diocese of Cardiff will be open from 7pm to 8pm for the Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For more detailed information please visit the diocesan website or look at your church notice board.

Each of you will make your own intentions for a Lenten exercise. Whatever it is, may this be a fruitful time of growth and development for us as individuals as well as members of our family, school, local community and parish. My wish is for a Holy Lent and a Happy Easter.

With every blessing

**+George Stack**

**Archbishop of Cardiff**