

**Concern for one another likewise means acknowledging the good that the Lord is doing in others** and giving thanks for the wonders of grace that Almighty God in his goodness continuously accomplishes in his children. When Christians perceive the Holy Spirit at work in others, they cannot but rejoice and give glory to the heavenly Father (cf. *Mt 5:16*).

### **3. "To stir a response in love and good works": walking together in holiness.**

These words of the *Letter to the Hebrews* (10:24) urge us to reflect on *the universal call to holiness*, the continuing journey of the spiritual life as we aspire to the greater spiritual gifts and to an ever more sublime and fruitful charity (*1 Cor 12:31-13:13*) ... The time granted us in this life is precious for discerning and performing good works in the love of God. In this way the Church herself continuously grows towards the full maturity of Christ (*Eph 4:13*). Our exhortation to encourage one another to attain the fullness of love and good works is situated in this dynamic prospect of growth. Sadly, there is always the temptation to become lukewarm, to quench the Spirit, to refuse to invest the talents we have received, for our own good and for the good of others (*Mt 25:25ff.*). All of us have received spiritual or material riches meant to be used for the fulfilment of God's plan, for the good of the Church and for our personal salvation (*Lk 12:21b; 1 Tim 6:18*). The spiritual masters remind us that in the life of faith those who do not advance inevitably regress.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us accept the invitation to aim for the "high standard of ordinary Christian living" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31). The wisdom of the Church in recognizing and proclaiming certain outstanding Christians as Blessed and as Saints is also meant to inspire others to imitate their virtues. Saint Paul exhorts us to "anticipate one another in showing honour" (*Rom 12:10*).

In a world which demands of Christians a renewed witness of love and fidelity to the Lord, may all of us feel the urgent need to anticipate one another in charity, service and good works (*Heb 6:10*). This appeal is particularly pressing in this holy season of preparation for Easter. As I offer my prayerful good wishes for a blessed and fruitful Lenten period, I entrust all of you to the intercession of the Mary Ever Virgin and cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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## **PASTORAL LETTER 3**

**22nd February 2012 – Ash Wednesday**

### **Lenten Season: “the value and meaning of fasting”**

Today we begin the Lenten Season. The Church invites all Christians to abandon sin and to start living as true Christians once more.

To help them do so, the Church urges us:

- to pray more and better than usual,
- to do penance (*fast and abstinence*),
- to help their brothers and sisters in need (*alms giving*).

Penance means doing something we find hard to do and to abstain from something we like to have. In Tok Pisin: “Wok sakrifais o givim pen long bodi bilong yumi”, for example: no buai, no smoke, no drink, etc. Two very common ways of doing penance in the early Church were *fasting* (to refrain from eating for most of the day) and *abstinence* (to do without certain kinds of food, such as meat).

Jesus, by words and example, gave a deeper meaning to fasting. For Jesus fasting was not just abstention from food; “true fasting is rather to do the will of the Heavenly Father, who sees in secret, and will reward you”. At the end of the 40 days spent in the desert, Jesus answered Satan that “*man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (*Mt 4:4*). If the desire to grow in the love of God and neighbour is not the centre of fasting, praying, and almsgiving, then all these

things will do the person no good (1Cor 13).

Nevertheless, Benedict XVI observes that, “fasting seems to have lost something of its spiritual meaning, and has taken on the value for the care of one's body. Fasting certainly brings benefits to physical well-being, but for believers, it is a means to heal all that prevents them from doing the will of God” (LM 2009). In other words, fasting is a means to turn away from sin so as to be more ready to do what God wants us to do. By doing something we find hard to do and by abstaining from something we would like to have, can help us to know ourselves better and to learn to discipline ourselves.

### **This brings me to make some other considerations.**

In times past, during Lent the Church invited people to repent, since no one is free of sin, but her appeal was especially directed to those Christians who had committed serious crimes which everyone came to know about (public sins).

Three kinds of sin were considered particularly serious by the Church:

- reneging (turning away) on one's own faith;
- adultery, and
- murder.

They were considered particularly serious not only because they went against God's commandments, but also because of the great harm they caused within the Christian community. People guilty of any of these sins were excluded from the Eucharist and from taking part in worship with the Christian community for the whole period of Lent. Only after having spent the time of Lent in prayer and penance were they re-admitted to the Eucharist on Holy Thursday, just before Easter.

Obviously, during the time of Lent, the Church invited not only public sinners, but all Christians to repentance. For many years, the Church commanded Christians to fast everyday of Lent, except on Sundays. Christians were also commanded to abstain from certain foods during this time. Even outside Lent, the Church declared certain days as days of fast or abstinence, or both.

Gradually, however, the number of days of fast and abstinence was greatly reduced. At present, the only days in Lent on which we **are bound** to *fast and abstain from meat* are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

prevailing mentality, rather than warning their brothers and sisters against ways of thinking and acting that are contrary to the truth and that do not follow the path of goodness. Christian admonishment, for its part, is never motivated by a spirit of accusation or recrimination. It is always moved by love and mercy, and springs from genuine concern for the good of the other. As the Apostle Paul says: "If one of you is caught doing something wrong, those of you who are spiritual should set that person right in a spirit of gentleness; and watch yourselves that you are not put to the test in the same way" (*Gal 6:1*). In a world pervaded by individualism, it is essential to rediscover the importance of fraternal correction, so that together we may journey towards holiness. Scripture tells us that even "the upright falls seven times" (*Prov 24:16*); all of us are weak and imperfect (cf. *1 Jn 1:8*). It is a great service, then, to help others and allow them to help us, so that we can be open to the whole truth about ourselves, improve our lives and walk more uprightly in the Lord's ways ...

### **2. "*Being concerned for each other*": the gift of reciprocity.**

... A society like ours can become blind to physical sufferings and to the spiritual and moral demands of life. This must not be the case in the Christian community! The Apostle Paul encourages us to seek “the ways which lead to peace and the ways in which we can support one another” (*Rom 14:19*) for our neighbour's good, ... seeking not personal gain but rather “the advantage of everybody else, so that they may be saved” (*1Cor 10:33*) This mutual correction and encouragement in a spirit of humility and charity must be part of the life of the Christian community.

The Lord's disciples, united with him through the Eucharist, live in a fellowship that binds them one to another as members of a single body. This means that the other is part of me, and that his or her life, his or her salvation, concern my own life and salvation. Here we touch upon a profound aspect of communion: our existence is related to that of others, for better or for worse. Both our sins and our acts of love have a social dimension. This reciprocity is seen in the Church, the mystical body of Christ: the community constantly does penance and asks for the forgiveness of the sins of its members, but also unfailingly rejoices in the examples of virtue and charity present in her midst ... Christians can also express their membership in the one body which is the Church through concrete concern for the poorest of the poor.

**a. Concern for others entails desiring what is good for them** from every point of view: physical, moral and spiritual. Contemporary culture seems to have lost the sense of good and evil, yet there is a real need to reaffirm that good does exist and will prevail, because God is "generous and acts generously" (*Ps* 119:68). The good is whatever gives, protects and promotes life, brotherhood and communion ...

**b. Concern for others means being aware of their needs** ... The Evangelist Luke relates two of Jesus' parables by way of example. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite "pass by", indifferent to the presence of the man stripped and beaten by the robbers (*Lk* 10:30-32). In that of Dives and Lazarus, the rich man is heedless of the poverty of Lazarus, who is starving to death at his very door (*Lk* 16:19). Both parables show examples of the opposite of "being concerned".

What hinders this humane and loving gaze towards our brothers and sisters? ... Often it is the tendency to put our own interests and problems above all else. We should never be incapable of "showing mercy" towards those who suffer. Our hearts should never be so wrapped up in our affairs and problems that they fail to hear the cry of the poor. Humbleness of heart and the personal experience of suffering can awaken within us a sense of compassion and empathy ... We can then understand the beatitude of "those who mourn" (*Mt* 5:5), those who in effect are capable of looking beyond themselves and feeling compassion for the suffering of others. Reaching out to others and opening our hearts to their needs can become an opportunity for salvation and blessedness.

**c. "Being concerned for each other" also entails being concerned for their spiritual well-being.** Here I would like to mention an aspect of the Christian life, which I believe has been quite forgotten: *fraternal correction in view of eternal salvation*. Today, in general, we are very sensitive to the idea of charity and caring about the physical and material well-being of others, but almost completely silent about our spiritual responsibility towards our brothers and sisters ... Christ himself commands us to admonish a brother who is committing a sin (*Mt* 18:15) ... The Church's tradition has included "admonishing sinners" among the spiritual works of mercy. It is important to recover this dimension of Christian charity. **We must not remain silent before evil.** I am thinking of all those Christians who, out of human regard or purely personal convenience, adapt to the

Some people, accustomed to the old rule, may wonder and question: "has the Church the power to change so ancient a custom?"

The Church was established by Christ to lead Christians to salvation. That is why, from time to time, she issues rules that help her faithful people to better observe God's commandments. As the Church established certain rules, the same Church has the power to cancel or modify the commands she herself has given in the past when these cease to be useful or bring serious inconvenience to the Christian community.

And so, there are various reasons why the Church has relaxed the rule of fast and abstinence:

- A) In ancient times the Church was limited mainly to Europe, to countries with more or less similar customs. Nowadays, instead, the Church is spread all over the world among peoples of different cultures; and what may be convenient for one region may easily cause difficulty in another.
- B) Again, life has undergone a deep change everywhere. Until not long ago, most peoples were engaged in farming and fishing; while now, so many are employed in industries, often on night duty and so on. For many, the observance of fast and abstinence became extremely difficult.

But can we say that the Church has relaxed the rule of fast and abstinence?

In a sense yes, since it caused some inconvenience to many. Nevertheless, the Church continues to urge us to abstain from foods or drinks or other things, like smoking and chewing betel nut, all things that we may enjoy very much. Certainly the Church condemns the abuse of food, alcohol, and the use of drugs. It might be appropriate here to remind everybody that the Catechism of the Catholic Church considers drunkenness and the use of drugs as grave sins (CCC 2290, 2291).

But while the Church no longer imposes fast and abstinence as a command, she still urges us to find other ways of doing penance.

There are so many ways, beside fast and abstinence, of doing penance. These include:

- fulfilling one's duties well,
- accepting with patience the difficulties of family life,

- bearing sickness for love of God,
- bearing patiently with people who cause us harm, and so on.

These and many others are like medicines which help us get cured from the disease of sin. But in applying them, the Church does what good doctors do: she applies the medicine according to the condition of each patient.

There is another reason that moved the Church to modify the old law of fast and abstinence, namely: that she wants us to grow into mature Christians. Hence, at the beginning of Lent, each one of us, of his/her own accord, should choose the kind of penance best suited to his/her spiritual needs.

I wish to conclude these thoughts on penance, by reminding everybody of the annual TARANGU APPEAL of the Catholic Bishops' Conference. The Bishops of Papua New Guinea would like that **every baptized Catholic** offers, during the Lenten Season, as the fruit of fast and/or abstinence, **one Kina each**. It is not too much, just one kina, which is less than a bottle of beer, about a couple of betel nuts, or few lollies. The money saved by these acts of mortification is to be collected during the whole period of Lent. After Easter the money will be sent to the Chancery, which, in turn, will send it to Caritas PNG to help poor people or people in emergency situations, such as natural disasters and calamities.

I am appealing to the Parish priests, to our church leaders, and to all our teachers, to lead by example during the Season of Lent, and then to help everybody to spend the Season of Lent in a spirit of joyful giving, mindful of the words of the Holy Father who wrote in his Lenten message of 2009: "Penance also helps to foster solidarity ... Voluntary fasting enables us to grow in the spirit of the Good Samaritan, who bends low and goes to the help of his suffering brother ... By freely embracing an act of self-denial for the sake of another, we make a statement that our brother or sister in need is not a stranger".

Let everybody be generous, remembering that: "those who are in a position to help others will realize that in doing so they themselves receive help" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 35).

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## Pope's Message for Lent 2012

*Let us be concerned for each other, to stir a response in love and good works'(Heb 10:24)*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Lenten season offers us once again an opportunity to reflect upon the very heart of Christian life: **charity**. This is a favourable time to renew our journey of faith, both as individuals and as a community, with the help of the word of God and the sacraments. This journey is one marked by prayer and sharing, silence and fasting, in anticipation of the joy of Easter.

This year I would like to propose a few thoughts in the light of a brief biblical passage drawn from the *Letter to the Hebrews*: "**Let us be concerned for each other, to stir a response in love and good works**". These words are part of a passage in which the sacred author exhorts us to trust in Jesus Christ as the High Priest who has won us forgiveness and opened up a pathway to God. Embracing Christ bears fruit in a life structured by the three theological virtues: it means approaching the Lord "sincere in heart and filled with *faith*" (v. 22), keeping firm "in the *hope* we profess" (v. 23) and ever mindful of living a life of "*love* and good works" (v. 24) together with our brothers and sisters. The author states that to sustain this life shaped by the Gospel it is important to participate in the liturgy and community prayer ...

### **1. Let us be concerned for each other!'responsibility towards our brothers and sisters.**

This first aspect is an invitation to be "concerned" ... All too often, however, our attitude is just the opposite: an indifference and disinterest born of selfishness and masked as a respect for "privacy". Today too, the Lord's voice summons all of us to be concerned for one another. Even today God asks us to be "guardians" of our brothers and sisters (*Gen 4:9*) ... The great commandment of love for one another demands that we acknowledge our responsibility towards those who are creatures and children of God. Being brothers and sisters in humanity and also in the faith, should help us to recognize in others a true *alter ego*, infinitely loved by the Lord. If we cultivate this way of seeing others as our brothers and sisters, solidarity, justice, mercy and compassion will naturally well up in our hearts.