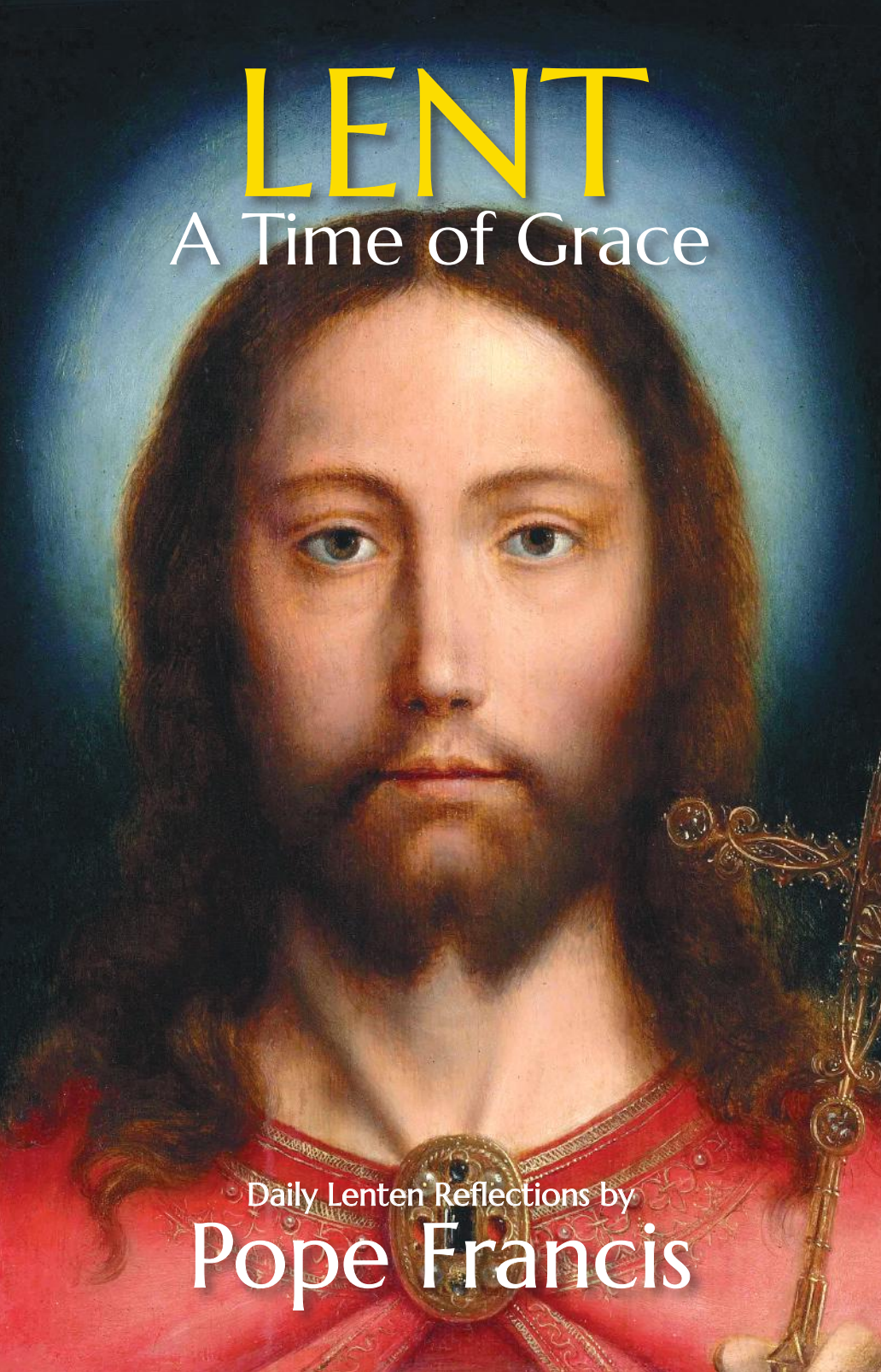


LENT

A Time of Grace

Daily Lenten Reflections by

Pope Francis



INTRODUCTION

“Lent is a time of renewal for the whole Church, for each community and every believer. Above all it is a *time of grace*.” So in these daily reflections, Pope Francis invites us to be drawn more deeply into the heart of God and its mystery of overflowing love. As we focus on Lent as a time of God’s gift of grace and conversion, we consider themes drawn from the basic biblical vocabulary of grace: God as a merciful benefactor (a good-gift-giver), and what God the benefactor gives—gifts and graces, mercy and forgiveness, blessings and benefits—which constitute our salvation, that is, our living in the right relationship with God and with others. Thus, we are essentially receivers of God’s grace or gifts, and truly our whole lives must be stamped with the character of thanksgiving (eucharist).

So our task this Lent is to let ourselves be touched by God’s grace, to be changed, and thus to become more like Christ so we can reach out to become benefactors to others by sharing our experience of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit at work in us. As Pope Francis reminds us, “This is the power of grace! Without grace we can do nothing. And with the grace of baptism and of eucharistic communion we can become instruments of God’s mercy. Let us not waste this season of Lent, so favorable a time for conversion!”

—*Steve Mueller, Editor*

Ash Wednesday

LENT: A TIME OF RENEWAL & GRACE

“Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation!”

(2 Corinthians 6:2)

Lent is a time of renewal for the whole Church, for each community and every believer. Above all it is a “time of grace.” God is not aloof from us. Each of us has a place in God’s heart. God knows us by name, cares for us and seeks us out whenever we turn away from him. God is interested in each of us. God’s love does not allow God to be indifferent to what happens to us. But because something is not right in us, in society or in the Church we need to change, to go in a new direction. And this is called needing to convert! Once again Lent comes to make its prophetic appeal, to remind us that it is possible to create something new within ourselves and around us, simply because God is faithful, always faithful. God continues to be rich in goodness and mercy, and always ready to forgive and start afresh. Let us not waste this season of Lent, so favorable a time for conversion!

What do I most want to do to “turn back” to God during this Lent?

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”

(Revelation 3:20)

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. Indifference to our neighbor 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 but so loves it that God gave his Son for our salvation. In the Incarnation, in the earthly life, death and resurrection of God’s Son, the gate between God and humanity, 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 God. Hence the hand, which is the Church, must never be surprised if it is rejected, crushed and wounded.

How might I “open the door” wider for God to enter into my life?

Friday after Ash Wednesday

COME, FOLLOW ME!

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:4)

Jesus calls us to follow him and to become his disciples. Being Christian does not render us flawless. Each of us trusts in the grace of the Lord regardless of our sins. We are all sinners, we have all sinned. In the Gospels, Jesus shows sinners that he does not look at their past, at their social status, at external conventions, but rather, he opens a new future to them. I once heard a beautiful saying: “There is no saint without a past nor a sinner without a future.” This is what Jesus does. It is enough to respond to the call with a humble and sincere heart. The Church is not a community of perfect people, but of disciples on a journey, who follow the Lord because they know they are sinners and in need of his pardon. Thus, Christian life is a school of humility which opens us to grace. We are all disciples who need to experience and live the comforting word of Jesus. We all need to be nourished by the mercy of God, for it is from this source that our salvation flows.

How might Jesus be calling me to follow him more closely this Lent?

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

LIVING IN GOD’S PRESENCE

“Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:6)

God’s Word guides us in living the Lenten season properly. When we do something good, at times we are tempted to be appreciated and to seek compensation in human glory. But it is a false compensation be-

cause it projects us toward what others think of us. Jesus asks us to do good for the sake of the good. He asks us to be aware that we are always under the gaze of the heavenly Father and to live in relation to him, not in relation to the judgment of others. Living in the presence of the Father is a far more profound joy than worldly glory. Our attitude this Lent must therefore be that of living in secret where the Father sees us, loves us and awaits us. Certainly, even external things are important, but we must always choose and experience them in God's presence. Let us do so in prayer, in mortification, and in the fraternal charity that we are humbly able to give before God. We will thus be worthy of the compensation of God the Father.

How might I better remember God's loving presence in all my daily actions?

1st Sunday of Lent

OVERCOMING THE TEMPTATION OF INDIFFERENCE

"Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." (Hebrews 3:12)

We are often 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! Second, we can help by acts of charity, reaching out to both those near and far through the Church's many charitable organizations. Lent is a favorable 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 us of the uncertainty of our own life and our dependence on God and our 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.

How might I show greater concern for the needs of others today?

Monday, Week 1

YOU ARE MY WITNESSES

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Every Christian community is called to go out of itself and be engaged in the life of the greater society it is part of, 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 person to God. 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 neighbors, 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. How greatly I desire that all those places where the Church is present, especially our parishes and our communities, may become islands of mercy amidst the sea of indifference!

How might I share with others the joy of my experience of God in Christ?

Tuesday, Week 1

GOD IS NEAR

“Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.” (Isaiah 55:6)

Lent is a true opportunity to enter deeply into the mystery of the goodness and love of God. In this holy season, the Church invites us to learn to know the Lord Jesus ever better, and to live the faith in a consistent way with a lifestyle that expresses God’s mercy. It is a commitment that we are called to take on in order to offer to those we meet the concrete sign of God’s closeness. My life, my attitude, the way of going through life, must really be a concrete sign of the fact that God is close to us. Small gestures of love, tenderness and care make people feel that the Lord is with us. In all these situations we convey God’s mercy through our life-giving commitment, which witnesses to our faith in

Christ. We must always bring God's tender caress—because God has caressed us with his mercy—bringing it to others, to those who are in need, to those who have anguish in their hearts or are sad. Approach them with God's caress, which is the same that God gave to us.

What small gestures of love can I do to show God's presence to others?

Wednesday, Week 1

TOTAL COMMITMENT

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5)

What does it mean to be committed? When I commit myself, I assume a responsibility, a task, for someone. It also means the way I carry out this task—the attitude of faithfulness and dedication, the particular care with which I carry out this task. Each day we are asked to put our heart and soul into what we do—prayer, work, study, but also in sport and recreation. Committing ourselves means making every effort to do our best in order to improve life. God too has committed himself to us. His first commitment was that of creating the world, and despite our attempts to ruin it—and there are many—God is committed to keeping it alive. But God's greatest commitment was that of giving us Jesus. Yes, Jesus is really the supreme commitment that God has assumed for us. In Jesus, God completely committed himself in order to restore hope to the poor, to those who were deprived of dignity, to strangers, to the sick, to captives and to sinners, whom he welcomed with kindness.

How might I be more committed to helping God overcome evil in my life today?



Thursday, Week I

BECOMING A GIFT FOR OTHERS

“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Romans 5:5)

Regarding God’s love, regarding God’s mercy—the divine grace poured into our hearts—one single thing is asked in return: unreserved giving. Not one of us can buy salvation! Salvation is a free gift of God that comes within us and dwells in us. As we have received freely, so are we called to give freely (Mt 10:8). Because if everything has been given to us, then everything must be passed on. How? By allowing the Holy Spirit to make of us a gift for others. The Spirit is a gift for us and we, by the power of the Spirit, must be a gift for others and allow the Holy Spirit to turn us into instruments of acceptance, instruments of reconciliation, instruments of forgiveness. If our life is allowed to be transformed by the grace of the Lord, for the grace of the Lord does transform us, we will not be able to keep to ourselves the light that comes from his face, but we will let it pass on to enlighten others.

How have I most experienced the Holy Spirit at work in me and my life?

Friday, Week I

MAKE OUR HEARTS LIKE YOURS

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” (Colossians 3:12)

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 realizes its own poverty and gives itself freely for others. Jesus’ compassion made him draw near to every person in pain. He does not hold back. Instead, he gets involved in people’s pain and their need for the simple reason that he knows and wants to show compassion, because he has a heart unashamed to have compassion. During this Lent, let us all ask the Lord: “Make our hearts like yours” (Litany of the Sacred Heart). 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 globalization of indifference.

How might I show compassion and share myself and my goods with others?

Saturday, Week I

GIVE GENEROUSLY

“You received without payment; give without payment.” (Matthew 10:10)

Three elements of our Lenten spiritual journey are prayer, fasting and almsgiving (Mt 6:1-6; 16-18). All three exclude the need for appearances. It might seem simple to give alms, but we must not empty this gesture of its importance. Indeed, the term “alms,” derives from the Greek and actually means “mercy.” Therefore, almsgiving must carry with it all the richness of mercy. Almsgiving is meant to alleviate the hardship of those in need. Jesus asks us not to give alms in order to be praised and admired by others for our generosity but in such a way that “your right hand does not know what your left hand is doing” (Mt 6:3). It is not appearances that count, but the capacity to stop to look in the face of that person asking for help. We must not identify almsgiving with the simple coin offered in haste, without looking at the person and without stopping to talk so as to understand what he or she truly needs. Thus, almsgiving is a gesture of love and sincere attention to those who approach us and ask for our help, done in secret where God alone sees and understands the value of the act performed.

What might I give today to help someone who is in need?

2nd Sunday of Lent

SHARING IN CHRIST'S GLORY

*“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”
(Matthew 17:5).*

In this time of Lent that still separates us from Easter, we are called to intensify the inner journey of conversion. Today's Gospel shows us the goal of our journey of conversion, namely participation in the glory of Christ. The Transfiguration takes place on his way to Jerusalem, where the prophecies of his redemptive sacrifice are to be fulfilled. His dis-

ciples do not understand this so Jesus chooses to give Peter, James and John a foretaste of his glory, which he will have after the resurrection, in order to confirm their faith and encourage them to follow him on the way of the cross. Thus, on a high mountain, immersed in prayer, he is transfigured before them. His face and his entire person irradiate a blinding light. The three disciples are frightened, as a cloud envelops them and the Father's voice sounds from above, as at Jesus' baptism. With Peter, James and John we too climb the mount of the Transfiguration and stop in contemplation of Jesus' face to retrieve the message and translate it into our lives. For we too can be transfigured by love. In reality, love is capable of transfiguring everything.

How might I trust more completely in Jesus and follow him to the cross?

Monday, Week 2

HOPING FOR CONVERSION

*"God being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them; often God restrained his anger, and did not stir up all his wrath."
(Psalm 78:38)*

The purpose of trial is that the people may experience the bitterness of those who abandon God, and thus confront the distressing emptiness of choosing death. Suffering, the inevitable consequence of a self-destructive decision, must make sinners reflect in order for them to be open to conversion and forgiveness. This is the way of divine mercy. God does not deal with us according to our faults. Punishment becomes an instrument to spur reflection. Thus, one can understand that God forgives his people and does not destroy all, but always leaves the door open to hope. Salvation entails the decision to listen and allow oneself to convert, but it is always freely given. When a person is sick he goes to the doctor; when a person feels he is a sinner he goes to the Lord. If, instead of going to the doctor, he goes to a sorcerer, he is not healed. So often we do not go to the Lord, but prefer to take the wrong path, seeking justifications, justice or peace without God.

What can I do to seek God's healing forgiveness today?

Tuesday, Week 2

CONVERSION OF HEART

“Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” (Joel 2:12)

Conversion of heart is the chief characteristic of this Lenten season of grace. The Gospel challenges all of us without exception, and it reminds us that conversion is not to be reduced to outward forms or to vague intentions, but engages and transforms one’s entire existence beginning from the center of the person, from the conscience. We are invited to embark upon a journey on which, by defying routine, we strive to open our eyes and ears, but especially to open our hearts, in order to go beyond our own “backyard,” opening oneself to God and to others. We know that this increasingly artificial world would have us live in a culture of “doing,” of the “useful,” where we exclude God from our horizon without realizing it. But we also exclude the horizon itself! Lent beckons us to rouse ourselves, to remind ourselves that we are creatures, simply put, that we are not God.

How might I open my heart to the needs of those closest to me today?

Wednesday, Week 2

THE GRACE OF CHRIST

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9)

I would like to offer some helpful thoughts on our path of conversion as individuals and as a community. Christ’s poverty shows how God works. Jesus does not reveal himself cloaked in worldly power and wealth but rather in weakness and poverty. He chose to be poor. He came amongst us and drew near to each of us. He set aside his glory and emptied himself so that he could be like us in all things. We can do this to the extent that we imitate Christ who became poor and enriched us by his poverty. Lent is a fitting time for self-denial. We would do well to ask ourselves what we can give up in order to help and enrich others by our own poverty. In a society so often intoxicated by consumerism and hedonism, wealth and extravagance, appearances

and narcissism, Jesus calls us to act in a way that is simple, balanced, consistent, capable of seeing and doing what is essential.

How might I best imitate Christ's self-denial in my actions this Lent?

Thursday, Week 2

HERALDS OF MERCY & HOPE

"Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24:47)

The Gospel is the real antidote to spiritual destitution. Wherever we go, we are called as Christians to proclaim the liberating news that forgiveness for sins committed is possible, that God is greater than our sinfulness, that God freely loves us at all times and that we were made for communion and eternal life. The Lord asks us to be joyous heralds of this message of mercy and hope! It is thrilling to experience the joy of spreading this good news, sharing the treasure entrusted to us, consoling broken hearts and offering hope to our brothers and sisters experiencing darkness. It means following and imitating Jesus, who sought out the poor and sinners as a shepherd lovingly seeks his lost sheep. In union with Jesus, we can courageously open up new paths of evangelization and human promotion.

How might I be a better herald of mercy and hope with those I meet today?

Friday, Week 2

LET JESUS CHANGE YOU

"The LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him." (2 Chronicles 30:9)

How many times have we felt the need to effect a change which would involve our entire person! How often do we say to ourselves: "I need to change, I can't continue this way. My life on this path will not bear fruit. It will be a useless life and I will not be happy." How often these thoughts come. And Jesus, who is near us, extends his hand and says, "Come, come to me. I'll do the work, I'll change your heart, I'll change your life, I will make you happy." But do we believe this or not? Jesus who is with us invites us to change our life. It is he, with the Holy

Spirit, who sows in us this restlessness to change our life and be a little better. Let us follow, therefore, this invitation of the Lord and let us not put up resistance, because only if we open ourselves to his mercy will we find true life and true joy. All we have to do is open the door wide, and he will do the rest. He does everything, but we must open our heart wide so that he can heal us and make us go forward. I assure you that you will be much happier.

With Jesus' help, what might I want to change about myself and my life now?

Saturday, Week 2

BECOMING MORE LIKE CHRIST

"A disciple is not above the teacher...; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher." (Matthew 10:24-25)

Lent is a favorable time for becoming more like Christ. 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. The Church is the communion of saints 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. 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 God's plan of salvation.

How might I spend more time in reading and prayer with God's Word?



3rd Sunday of Lent

LEAVE YOUR WATER JAR

“Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.” (Mark 5:19)

Jesus is so very merciful! The outcome of his encounter with the Samaritan woman is her transformation: “the woman left her water jar” (Jn 4:28) and ran to the city to tell people about her extraordinary experience. She had gone to draw water from the well, but she found another kind of water, the living water of mercy from which gushes forth eternal life. She found the water she had always sought! Because every encounter with Jesus changes our lives, it is a step closer to God. So we likewise find the impetus to “leave behind our water jar,” the symbol of everything that is seemingly important, but loses all its value before the love of God. What is your interior water jar, the one that weighs you down, that distances you from God? Let us set it aside. Let us hear Jesus’ voice offering us another kind of water that brings us close to him. We are called to rediscover the importance and the sense of our Christian life and witness to the joy of the encounter with Jesus who changes our life. And so we must tell of the marvelous things the Lord can do when we have the courage to set aside our own water jar.

What most distances me from God that I need to leave behind?

Monday, Week 3

SEEKING FORGIVENESS

“Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.” (Acts 3:19)

We are all weak and we are all sinners—and we must ask for forgiveness every time we err! It is important, when we feel the weight of our sin to approach the sacrament of reconciliation. Someone might say: “But I am afraid that the priest will chastise me.” No, the priest will not chastise you. Do you know who you will encounter in the sacrament of reconciliation? You will encounter Jesus who is waiting for you there and who pardons you! The sacrament of penance or confession is like a “second baptism” that refers back to the first to strengthen and renew it. In this sense, the day of our baptism is the point of departure for the

journey towards God that lasts a lifetime, a journey of conversion that is continually sustained by the sacrament of penance. When we go to confess our weaknesses, our sins, we go to ask the pardon of Jesus, but we also go to renew our baptism through his forgiveness. Therefore, confession is not a matter of sitting down in a torture chamber, rather it is a celebration. Confession is for the baptized! To keep clean the white garment of our Christian dignity!

How might I best seek forgiveness from God and from others today?

Tuesday, Week 3

BE RECONCILED TO GOD

“We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

(2 Corinthians 5:20)

Let us be reconciled to God! This Lent is a time of reconciliation for everyone. Many people would like to be reconciled to God but they don't know how to do it, or they don't feel worthy, or they don't want to admit it, not even to themselves. The Christian community can and must foster the sincere return to God for those who feel this yearning. Especially those who carry out the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18) are called to be instruments docile to the Holy Spirit, for where one has abandoned sin mercy can abound (Rom 5:20). No one should be separated from God because of obstacles put there by mankind! This is the place where the Father receives, welcomes and forgives this person. Let us be reconciled to God! All of us! May this Lent be a positive time to rediscover our need for the tenderness and closeness of the Father, to return to him with all our heart.

What obstacles must I remove that prevent my return to God?



Wednesday, Week 3

BUILDING BRIDGES OF RECONCILIATION

“Through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (Colossians 1:20)

The experience of reconciliation to God allows us to discover the necessity of other forms of reconciliation—in families, in interpersonal relationships, in ecclesial communities, as well as in social international relations. Someone recently said to me that in the world there are more enemies than friends, and I believe he is right. Instead, let us build bridges of reconciliation among us, beginning in the family. How many siblings have argued and become estranged over inheritance. This shouldn't happen! This Lent is the time of reconciliation, with God and among us! Reconciliation is also a service to peace, solidarity and the welcome of all. Let us accept, therefore, the invitation to be reconciled to God, in order to become new creatures and to radiate God's mercy among our brothers and sisters, among the people. God is always ready to forgive, and never tires of forgiving in ways that are continually new and surprising.

What must I do to build a bridge of reconciliation with those closest to me?

Thursday, Week 3

GOD IS GREATER THAN OUR SIN

“Have mercy on me, O God... blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” (Psalm 51:1-2).

Our plea for forgiveness is addressed to the God of mercy in order that, moved by a love as great as that of a father or mother, God have mercy, that is, grant grace, show his favor with benevolence and understanding. It is a heartfelt plea to God, who alone can free one from sin. Very descriptive images are used: blot out, wash me, cleanse me. Made manifest in this prayer is our true need—that of being forgiven, freed from evil and from its consequence of death. Unfortunately, life often makes us experience these situations. So we must trust in mercy. God is greater than our sin. “Father, I do not know how to say it. I have committed many serious sins!” God is greater than all the sins we

can commit. God's love is an ocean in which we can immerse ourselves without fear of being overcome: to God forgiving means giving us the certainty that he never abandons us. Whatever our heart may admonish us, God is still and always greater than everything, because God is greater than our sin.

From what sins do I most want God to cleanse me?

Friday, Week 3

HELP ME UP!

“How great is the mercy of the Lord, and his forgiveness for those who return to him!” (Sirach 17:29)

When a child falls, what does she do? She raises her hand to mom, to dad so they help her to get up. Let us do the same! If out of weakness you fall into sin, raise your hand—the Lord will take it and help you get up. We sinners, with forgiveness, become new creatures, filled by the spirit and full of joy. Now a new reality begins for us—a new heart, a new spirit, a new life. We, forgiven sinners, who have received divine grace, can even teach others to sin no more. God's forgiveness is what we all need, and it is the greatest sign of his mercy. It is a gift that every forgiven sinner is called to share with every brother and sister he meets. All those whom the Lord has placed beside us, family, friends, coworkers, parishioners—everyone needs, as we do, the mercy of God. It is beautiful to be forgiven, but you too, if you want to be forgiven, forgive in turn.

How might I best thank God for my forgiveness and share that experience with others?

Saturday, Week 3

RESPONDING TO GOD'S GRACE

“My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:21)

Everything is a free gift from God, everything is grace, everything is a gift out of God's love for us. The angel Gabriel calls Mary “full of grace” (Lk 1:28)—in her there is no room for sin, because God chose

her from eternity to be the mother of Jesus and preserved her from original sin. And Mary responds to the grace and abandons herself, saying to the angel: “Let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). And the Word was made flesh in her womb. God works so many marvels in us. Physically, Mary receives the power of the Holy Spirit and then gives flesh and blood to the Son of God who forms within her. Spiritually, she accepts the grace and responds to it with faith. She conceived first faith and then the Lord. This mystery of the acceptance of grace, which in Mary, as a unique privilege, was without the obstacle of sin, is a possibility for all. We too are asked to listen to God who speaks to us, and to accept God’s will. Nothing is more productive and fruitful than listening to and accepting God’s Word. The Lord is always speaking to us!

Like Mary, how might I bring God to birth within me and share that experience with others?

4th Sunday of Lent

OPENING OURSELVES TO GOD’S GRACE

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

The blind man’s journey in John’s Gospel (ch 9) is a journey in stages that begins with the knowledge of Jesus’ name. He does not know anything else about him; he is just “a man called Jesus,” then “a prophet,” and a man close to God. Once he has been banished from the temple, expelled from society, Jesus finds him again and “opens his eyes” for the second time, by revealing his own identity to him: “I am the messiah.” Our lives are sometimes similar to that of the blind man who opened himself to the light, who opened himself to God, who opened himself to God’s grace. But sometimes unfortunately we are similar to the doctors of the law—from the height of our pride we judge others, and even the Lord! Today, we are invited to open ourselves to the light of Christ in order to bear fruit in our lives, to eliminate unchristian behaviors that are sins. We must repent of this, eliminate these behaviors in order to journey well along the way of holiness.

How might I better open myself to God’s gifts and use them to help others?

Monday, Week 4

YOU DID IT TO ME

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)

For all of us, Lent is a favorable time to overcome our estrangement by listening to God’s word and by practicing the works of mercy. In the corporal works of mercy we touch the flesh of Christ in our brothers and sisters who need to be fed, clothed, sheltered, visited. In the spiritual works of mercy—counsel, instruction, forgiveness, admonishment and prayer—we touch more directly our own sinfulness. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy must never be separated. By touching the flesh of the crucified Jesus in their suffering, sinners can receive the gift of realizing that they too are poor and in need. By taking this path, the proud, the powerful and the wealthy can also be embraced and undeservedly loved by the crucified Lord who died and rose for them. This love alone is the answer to that yearning for infinite happiness and love that we think we can satisfy with the idols of knowledge, power and riches. Yet the danger always remains that by a constant refusal to open the doors of their hearts to Christ who knocks on them in the poor, the proud, rich and powerful will end up condemning themselves and plunging into the eternal abyss of solitude which is hell.

Which of the works of mercy might I do for someone today?

Tuesday, Week 4

LETTING MERCY SHINE FORTH

“Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” (1 Peter 4:10)

God’s mercy transforms human hearts. It enables us, through the experience of a faithful love, to become merciful in turn. In an ever new miracle, divine mercy shines forth in our lives, inspiring each of us to love our neighbor and to devote ourselves to what the Church’s tradition calls the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. These works remind us that faith finds expression in concrete everyday actions meant to help our neighbors in body and spirit—by feeding, visiting, com-

forting and instructing them. On such things will we be judged. As Christians, then, we must reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. This will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty, and to enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. For in the poor, the flesh of Christ becomes visible in the flesh of the tortured, the crushed, the scourged, the malnourished, and the exiled to be acknowledged, touched, and cared for by us.

To whom might I show my concern and care in my actions today?

Wednesday, Week 4

FREED BY GOD'S GRACE

"To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD."

(Daniel 9:9-10)

When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive. But all of us know well the experience of sin. We know that we are called to perfection (Mt 5:48), yet we feel the heavy burden of sin. Though we feel the transforming power of grace, we also feel the effects of sin typical of our fallen state. Despite being forgiven, the conflicting consequences of our sins remain. In the sacrament of reconciliation, God forgives our sins, which he truly blots out. And yet sin leaves a negative effect on the way we think and act. But the mercy of God is stronger than even this. It becomes indulgence on the part of the Father who, through the Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin.

With God's help, what negative effects my past sins do I need to overcome?



Thursday, Week 4

SUFFERING & LOVE

*“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”
(2 Corinthians 12:9)*

Each of us, sooner or later, is called to face—at times painfully—frailty and illness, both our own and those of others. How many different faces do these common yet dramatically human experiences take! Yet all of them directly raise the pressing question of the meaning of life. Our hearts may quietly yield to cynicism, as if the only solution were simply to put up with these experiences, trusting only in our own strength. Or we may put complete trust in science, thinking that surely somewhere in the world there is a medicine capable of curing the illness. Sadly, however, this is not always the case, and, even if the medicine did exist, it would be accessible to very few people. The way we experience illness and disability is an index of the love we are ready to offer. The way we face suffering and limitation is the measure of our freedom to give meaning to life’s experiences, even when they strike us as meaningless and unmerited.

What suffering or physical frailty do I most need to recognize as God’s gift?

Friday, Week 4

GOD WILL FIND US

*“God’s mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.”
(Luke 1:50)*

God has never failed to offer forgiveness to men and women. God’s mercy is felt from generation to generation. Often we believe that our sins distance the Lord from us. In reality, in sinning, we may distance ourselves from God, but, seeing us in danger, God tries all the harder to find us. God never gives in to the possibility that a person could stay estranged from his love, provided, however, that God find in him or her some sign of repentance for the evil done. By our efforts alone, we cannot be reconciled to God. Sin truly is the expression of the rejection of God’s love, with the consequence of closing in on ourselves, deluding ourselves into thinking that we have found greater freedom and

autonomy. To use a common expression: when we sin, we “turn away from God.” Thus, sin continues to expand the distance between us and God, and this can become a chasm. However, Jesus comes to find us and then rebuilds the bridge that connects us to the Father and allows us to rediscover our dignity as God’s children.

In what ways have I rejected God and God’s love? With what consequences?

Saturday, Week 4

GOD’S GRACE IN WORD & SACRAMENT

“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

God’s Word permeates us and, like a scalpel, operates deep in the heart so as to free us from the evil lurking in our life. At times this Word is painful because it discloses deception, reveals false excuses, lays bare hidden truths. But at the same time it illuminates and purifies, gives strength and hope. It is an invaluable tonic on our journey of faith. The Eucharist, for its part, nourishes us with the very life of Jesus, like an immensely powerful remedy and, in a mysterious way, it continuously renews the grace of our baptism. By approaching the Eucharist we are nourished of the body and blood of Jesus, and by entering us, Jesus joins us to his body! All of us are invited to the table of the Lord. Let us make our own this invitation and sit beside the Lord together with his disciples. Let us learn to look with mercy and to recognize each of them as fellow guests at the table.

How might I actively hear God’s Word and participate in the Eucharist?

5th Sunday of Lent

GOD’S GRACE AT WORK

“I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory.” (John 17:24)

Jesus’ act of raising Lazarus shows the extent to which the power of God’s grace can go, and, thus, the extent of our conversion, our transformation. There is no limit to the divine mercy offered to everyone!

We believe that the life of whoever believes in Jesus and follows his commandment will be transformed after death into new life, full and immortal. As Jesus is resurrected with his own body and does not return to an earthly life, so too will we be raised with our bodies which will have been transfigured into glorified bodies. He expects us to be with the Father, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, who raised him, he will also raise those who are united to him. No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by his boundless and unfailing love. He makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew. Let us not flee from the resurrection of Jesus, let us never give up, come what will. May nothing inspire us more than his life, which impels us onwards!

How have I most experienced God's gift of new life this Lent?

Monday, Week 5

BEARERS OF CHRIST

"I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you." (Romans 1:11)

When we encounter the Lord, we must share the joy of this encounter and of his mercy. Indeed, the concrete sign that we have truly encountered Jesus is the joy that we show in communicating it to others. And this is not "proselytizing," this is giving a gift—I give you what gives me joy. This was also the experience of the first disciples. After their first encounter with Jesus, Andrew went immediately to tell his brother Peter (Jn 1:40-42), and Philip did the same with Nathanael (Jn 1:45-46). To encounter Jesus is to experience his love. This love transforms us and makes us able to transmit to others the power it gives. In a way we could say that from the day of our baptism each one of us is given a new name in addition to the one given to us by our mom and dad. This name is *Christopher*—*Bearer of Christ*. It is the name of our attitude, the attitude of a bearer of the joy of Christ, of the mercy of Christ. Thus every Christian is a *Christopher*, that is, a bearer of Christ!

What might I share with others that will draw them closer to Jesus?

Tuesday, Week 5

INSTRUMENTS OF GOD'S GRACE

“Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” (Ephesians 4:1-2)

The mercy that we receive from the Father is not given as a private consolation, but makes us instruments that others too might receive the same gift. There is a wonderful interplay between mercy and mission. Experiencing mercy renders us missionaries of mercy, and to be missionaries allows us to grow ever more in the mercy of God. Therefore, let us take our Christian calling seriously and commit to live as believers, because only then can the Gospel touch a person's heart and open it to receive the grace of love, to receive this great, all-welcoming mercy of God. Everyone, in fact, without exception, is called to embrace the call to mercy. Continue on your journey of faith and open your hearts to God the merciful Father who never tires of forgiving us. Faced with the challenges of every day, be shining examples of Christian hope, which is the certitude of the victory of love over hate and of peace over war.

How might I be more open to God's grace and so share it with others?

Wednesday, Week 5

LIVING THE GOSPEL OF MERCY

“Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.” (1 Peter 1:22)

The Church is commissioned to announce God's mercy, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person. It must pattern its behavior after Christ who went out to everyone without exception. In the task of the new evangelization, the theme of mercy needs to be proposed again and again with new enthusiasm and renewed pastoral action. It is absolutely essential for the Church and for the credibility of her message that she herself live and testify to mercy. Her language and her gestures must

transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them once more to find the road that leads to the Father. The Church's first truth is the love of Christ. The Church makes herself a servant of this love and mediates it to all people—a love that forgives and expresses itself in the gift of one's self. Consequently, wherever the Church is present, God's mercy must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy.

How might I witness better to God's mercy in my life?

Thursday, Week 5

MISSIONARY DISCIPLES

"If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!"

(1 Corinthians 9:16)

In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples and agents of evangelization. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization. Indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus. We no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries," but rather that we are always "missionary disciples." Each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are. All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives. In your heart you know that it is not the same to live without him. What you have come to realize, what has helped you to live and given you hope, is what you also need to communicate to others.

What has most helped me to follow Jesus and given me hope?

Friday, Week 5

GOD'S NEWNESS IN OUR LIFE

*“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth,
do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19)*

Newness always makes us a bit fearful, because we feel more secure if we have everything under control, if we are the ones who build, program and plan our lives in accordance with our own ideas, our own comfort, our own preferences. This is also the case when it comes to God. Often we follow and accept God, but only up to a certain point. It is hard to abandon ourselves to God with complete trust, allowing the Holy Spirit to be the soul and guide of our lives in our every decision. We fear that God may force us to strike out on new paths and leave behind our all too narrow, closed and selfish horizons in order to become open to God's own. Yet throughout the history of salvation, whenever God reveals himself, he brings newness and demands our complete trust. The newness which God brings into our life is something that actually brings fulfillment, that gives true joy, true serenity, because God loves us and desires only our good. Let us ask ourselves today: Are we open to “God's surprises”? Or are we closed and fearful before the newness of the Holy Spirit?

What new thing has God done for me during this Lenten season?

Saturday, Week 5

EVERYDAY EVANGELIZATION

“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.” (1 Corinthians 2:1)

Today, as the Church seeks to experience a profound missionary renewal, there is a kind of preaching which falls to each of us as a daily responsibility. It has to do with bringing the Gospel to the people we meet, whether they be our neighbors or complete strangers. This is the informal preaching which often takes place in the middle of a conversation. Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place—on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey. In

this preaching, the first step is personal dialogue, when the other person shares his or her joys, hopes and concerns. Only afterwards is it possible to bring up God's word, perhaps by reading a Bible verse or relating a story, but always keeping in mind the fundamental message—the personal love of God who became human, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship.

When have I been most successful in sharing the gospel message with others?

Passion/Palm Sunday of Lent

ACCOMPANYING JESUS

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Matthew 21:9)

Jesus enters Jerusalem with crowds, celebrating, praise, blessing, peace—joy fills the air. Jesus has awakened great hopes, especially in the hearts of the simple, the humble, the poor, the forgotten, those who do not matter in the eyes of the world. He understands human sufferings, he has shown the face of God's mercy, and he has bent down to heal body and soul. This is Jesus. This is his heart which looks to all of us, to our sicknesses, to our sins. Jesus' love is great. At Mass, we too wave our palms, our olive branches. We too welcome Jesus; we too express our joy at accompanying him, at knowing him to be close, present in us and among us as a friend, a brother, and also as a king. Let us follow Jesus! We accompany Jesus, but above all we know that he accompanies us and carries us on his shoulders. This is our joy, this is the hope that we must bring to this world.

What might I do to spend more time with God during this Holy Week?

Monday Holy Week

GOD'S ANSWER TO EVIL

“He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5)

Jesus attains complete humiliation through “death on the cross.” It was the worst form of death, that reserved for slaves and criminals. Jesus was considered a prophet but died like a criminal. As we contem-

plate Jesus in his passion, we see reflected the suffering of humanity, and we discover the divine answer to the mystery of evil, suffering and death. Many times we feel horror at the evil and suffering that surrounds us and we ask ourselves: “Why does God allow it?” It deeply wounds us to see suffering and death, especially that of the innocent! When we see children suffer it wounds our hearts—it is the mystery of evil. And Jesus takes all of this evil, all of this suffering upon himself. When at certain moments in life we fail to find any way out of our difficulties, when we sink in the thickest darkness, at the moment of our total humiliation and despoliation when we experience that we are frail and are sinners, then we must not deny our failure but rather open ourselves trustingly to hope in God, as Jesus did.

*How might I thank Jesus for his willingness to take all evil
and suffering upon himself?*

Tuesday Holy Week

THE GOD WHO PARDONS

*“Let the wicked return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” (Isaiah 55:7)*

This is how God acts towards us sinners. The Lord continually offers us pardon and helps us accept it and be aware of our wrong-doing to free us from it. For God wants not our condemnation, but our salvation. God does not want to condemn anyone! One of you might ask me: “But Father, didn’t Pilate deserve condemnation? Did God want that?” No! God wanted to save Pilate as well as Judas, everyone! The difficulty is in allowing God to enter our hearts. Every word of the prophets is a passionate appeal full of love which seeks our conversion. This is the heart of God, the heart of a Father who loves and wants his children to live in goodness and in justice, and thus that they might live to the fullest and be happy. The heart of a Father who goes beyond our little concept of justice to open us to the limitless horizons of his mercy. His is the heart of a Father who does not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults. His is precisely the heart of the Father whom we want to encounter when we go to the confessional.

How might I thank God for his loving pardon of all sinners, including myself?

Wednesday Holy Week

FROM LOVE TO SERVICE

“Peter said to him, ‘You will never wash my feet.’ Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.’” (John 13:8)

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 realize 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 “share” with him and thus can serve others.

To whom in need might I offer my humble service today?

Holy Thursday

SHARE THIS NOURISHMENT

*“This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”
(Luke 22:19)*

On Holy Thursday Jesus institutes the Eucharist, anticipating in the Passover supper his sacrifice on Golgotha. To make the apostles understand the love which enlivens him, he washes their feet, offering once again the example of how they must act. The Eucharist is the love that becomes service. It is the sublime presence of Christ who wishes to relieve from hunger every man and woman, especially the weakest, to enable them to undertake a journey of witnessing amid the difficulties of the world. Moreover, in giving himself to us as food, Jesus attests that we must learn to share this nourishment with others so that it may become a true communion of life with those who are in need. He gives himself to us and asks us to dwell in him in order to do likewise. The more we unite ourselves to Jesus through prayer, sacred Scripture, the Eucharist, the sacraments celebrated and lived in the Church and in

fraternity, the more there will grow in us the joy of cooperating with God in the service of the kingdom of mercy and truth, of justice and peace.

How might I stay more united with Christ and share his life with others?

Good Friday

THE MYSTERY OF LOVE

“It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

The mystery which we adore in this Holy Week is a great history of love which knows no obstacles. Good Friday is the culminating moment of love. It is the commemoration of a drama of love which gives us the certainty that we will never be abandoned in life’s trials. The death of Jesus, who on the cross surrenders himself to the Father in order to offer salvation to the entire world, expresses love given to the end, a love without end, a love that seeks to embrace everyone, that excludes no one. A love that extends over time and space—an inexhaustible source of salvation to which each of us, sinners, can draw. If God has shown us his supreme love in the death of Jesus, then we too, regenerated by the Holy Spirit, can and must love one another. John the evangelist offers us the key to understanding its profound meaning: “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). The love of God has no bounds. As St Augustine often repeated, it is a love that goes “to the end without end.” God truly offers all of himself for each of us and holds nothing back.

How might I share my experience of God’s love with those I meet today?



Holy Saturday

GOD'S SILENCE

*“For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.”
(Psalm 62:5)*

Holy Saturday is the day of God’s silence. It must be a day of silence, and we must do everything possible so that for us it may truly be a day of silence, as it was in that time—the day of the silence of God. Laid in the sepulcher, Jesus shares with all of humanity in the tragedy of death. It is a silence which speaks and expresses love as solidarity with those who have always been neglected, whom the Son of God reaches, filling the emptiness that only the infinite mercy of God the Father can fill. God is silent, but out of love. On this day, love—that silent love—becomes the expectation of life in the resurrection. Let us also think about the silence of Mary, “the believer,” who awaited the resurrection in silence. She will be, for us, the icon of Holy Saturday. Think hard about how she lived that Holy Saturday—in expectation. It is love that has no doubt, but which hopes in the word of the Lord, that it may be made manifest and resplendent on the day of Easter.

*How has my Lenten silence prepared me to hope
in the power of the resurrection?*

Easter Sunday

THE LORD HAS RISEN AMONG US!

“We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.” (Romans 6:9)

Today our hearts are again filled with the joy of Easter. After the Lenten season, the time of penance and conversion, after the striking celebrations of the Holy Triduum, today we stand before Jesus’ empty tomb and meditate with wonder and gratitude on the resurrection of the Lord. Life has conquered death. Mercy and love have conquered sin! The Lord has risen among us! This truth indelibly marked the lives of the apostles who, after the resurrection, again sensed the need to follow their teacher and, having received the Holy Spirit, set out fearlessly to proclaim to all what they had seen with their own eyes and personally experienced. Christ’s resurrection is not an event of the past. It contains a vital power which has permeated this world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up. It is an irresistible force. In the midst of darkness something new always springs to life and sooner or later produces fruit. We need faith and hope in order to open ourselves to this new and marvelous horizon. And we know that faith and hope are gifts from God, and we need to ask for them: “Lord, grant me faith, grant me hope! I need them so much!” Then with our attitude, with our witness, with our life, we can say: Jesus is risen!

What experience of new life do I most want to carry forward now that Lent has ended?

