

PASTORAL LETTER FOR LENT 2009

CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

FOR READING/DISTRIBUTION: SUNDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2009

INTRODUCTION:

“Grace and peace to you from Our Lord Jesus Christ”

This greeting is a very familiar one which St. Paul used regularly to greet the early Christian communities. Grace can be viewed as the gift of relationship with God and each other in the Church. Lent is, in fact, a time when we can recover the grace of our baptism and experience God's peace in our lives by turning away from sin and renewing our commitment to live as sons and daughters of God. As an Archdiocese we can also experience God's grace in the call to renew our parish communities as places where we grow in relationship with God and each other.

A REMINDER OF OUR LENTEN TRADITIONS BY POPE BENEDICT XVI:

In Lent there are three traditional pathways to enable us to grow in God's grace, these are the Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Pope Benedict XVI has encouraged us to make good use of these on our Lenten Journey together. More **intense prayer** enables us to grow in friendship with God. **Fasting** focuses our desire for God and helps us to grow in the spirit of the Good Samaritan, opening our eyes to the situations of poverty and need in which so many of our brothers and sisters live. **Almsgiving** helps us to make a practical response to the needs of our brothers and sisters. We can encourage each other to use these spiritual tools as a means of growing in grace.

EMPHASIS BY POPE ON FASTING:

In his own Lenten Letter, Pope Benedict emphasises this year the value and the meaning of fasting. He indicates that according to Sacred Scriptures and the entire Christian tradition, fasting is a **great help to avoid sin and all that leads to it**; he indicates that Jesus himself indicates something of the profound motive for fasting, namely to do the will of the Father in Heaven; and goes on to write how the practice of fasting was present in the first Christian community and has continued since then down to our own time.

He writes that: “It is good to see how the ultimate goal of fasting is to help each one of us, as the late Pope John Paul II wrote, to make the complete gift of self to God”.

The Lenten resources recently circulated from our Pastoral Office at Gillis contain a valuable ‘examination of conscience’ which will be a very useful help for parishes and deaneries as they prepare perhaps collectively in services of reconciliation for individual confession and absolution during this season of Lent.

A number of things are suggested in this examination of conscience from which we can fast – allowing us to feast on other things!

Thus it is suggested that we should examine our consciences on things such as: ‘Fast from judging others – so that we can feast on Christ dwelling in them; fast from discontent – so that we can feast on gratitude; fast from complaining – so that we can feast on appreciation’.

YEAR OF ST PAUL:

In addition, as you know, this year we are celebrating the ‘Year of St. Paul’, the 2000th anniversary since the birth of that great apostle and missionary. I am sure we could do well to reflect more closely on the readings of St Paul, which we find in the Sundays of Lent. When we look at the early Christian communities which Paul addressed we can see that they were devoted ‘to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers’ (Acts 2:42) Still today we are called in each of our local communities to be faithful to the word, to the Eucharist and to prayer. Sharing of resources and gifts was a key feature of life in the early Christian communities that Paul visited. This was inspired by a rich theology of participation which developed from the realisation that together we make up the body of Christ. In continuity with this all baptised members of the body of Christ are gifted by God and each of us is called to make our contribution to making our parishes homes and schools of communion.

‘FAST FROM WHAT IS MINE; FEAST ON WHAT IS OURS’:

And this gives me a further suggestion for our fasting: **Can we fast from what we see is ‘mine’ – so that we can feast on what is ‘ours’?** Our parishes are places where we can work together to build up the body of Christ today. During this Lent I invite you to prayerfully discern together how we can best use our common resources and gifts to sustain and strengthen the life of our parish communities. This has been the key reason for structurally reorganising the deaneries in our archdiocese. It could be tempting to simply re-organise where priests live, the numbers and times of masses and similar practical matters. Whilst these matters need to be addressed, a parish is much more than a Mass station, it is a place where each of us can find a welcoming, nourishing home.

To this end each parish has now been grouped in a cluster, so that we can maximise the potential of each community. A cluster is a group of neighbouring parishes and I know that many are already functioning very well in different areas of the Archdiocese. These clusters will gradually grow in relationship with each other and enable each parish to share resources and gifts. To facilitate the ongoing growth of clusters we will begin to have a series of conversations where we can share our common concerns and also share ways that we can work together. In the first phase of these cluster conversations I invite each parish community to explore what resources and gifts could be shared with neighbouring parishes, and also to identify what needs to be strengthened and developed in parish communities. In the next phase of conversations I invite you to explore what forms of co-ordination and collaboration could be developed for pastoral care. Another stage of the conversations will be about how clusters could work together to provide formation for a variety of ministries. Each cluster will need to think through various possibilities for their own situation, to discern prayerfully how best to work together, and make sound practical plans. Hopefully many fruitful opportunities for working together will emerge and become part of each parishes pastoral planning.

CONCLUSION:

In this Year of St Paul, I pray that we will all experience God’s grace and peace in our lives in a new way and that we will work together to build vibrant communities of faith where sharing, good relationships and community spirit can grow and be nurtured.

During this Lenten fast, I continue to pray that we will all experience that ‘Grace and Peace’ from Our Lord Jesus Christ – both in our own lives and in our parishes.

May God indeed bless you all at this time.

Yours sincerely in Christ

+ *Keith Patrick*

+ Keith Patrick Cardinal O’Brien
Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh