

PASTORAL LETTER FOR LENT 2021

FROM BISHOP LARRY DUFFY, BISHOP OF CLOGHER

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

The season of Lent has been likened to a retreat or mission undertaken by the worldwide Church. Over forty days three themes are presented and explored: penance, baptism and the passion of Christ. It is a time when we are encouraged to take time out, to go to our room, close the door and pray to our Father in private (cf. Matthew 6:6).

During this last year, we have been confined to our rooms, perhaps more than we'd like. It has been a lonely experience for us. It has not been possible for us to come together very much as members of the Church community due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Last year our Lenten journey was changed rather quickly. The continuing restrictions and our obligation to protect the health and life of others demand of us that Lent 2021 will be quite similar. This year, the ancient and popular custom of receiving ashes – expressing a willingness to do penance – will not be possible.

The call to do penance is an ever-present invitation in Scripture. Lent invites us to an inner change of heart; a turning to God; a rejection of all that is evil; an opportunity for us to walk in a new direction. In the Gospel passage proclaimed on Ash Wednesday we are reminded that the traditional works of penance are fasting, almsgiving and prayer. St Peter Chrysologus sees these three as being inseparably linked when he says: 'what prayer knocks for on a door, fasting successfully begs and mercy receives.' (Sermon 43; Office of Readings, Third Tuesday in Lent)

The season of Lent invites us to renew our dedication to prayer and reflection on the Word of God. This is a good time to renew the practice of family prayer. Covid-19 has caused many in our world to plead for the bare necessities of life. Trócaire, the Society of St Vincent de Paul and many other charities help us respond to the cries of those in need in our world. These cries are even greater now. Fasting from alcohol, TV, and the consumption of certain foods are traditional favourite forms of penance for Lent. Maybe we can do something this year, such as supporting our frontline workers or encouraging compliance with public health regulations in an effort to protect others. These actions could be undertaken as a form of fasting this year. Whatever you undertake, know that God's grace and blessing is showered upon you.

To help you and your parish, the Diocese will be making a number of resources available online via www.clogherdiocese.ie and our social media platforms to help families – the Domestic Church – to pray as one this Lent. As part of the 'digital Church', please continue to join in the online celebration of Mass and other prayer moments from our many churches that are now reaching out to you using modern technologies. There will also be an online Diocesan Way of the Cross on the evening of Friday 26 March, led by people from all seven Pastoral Areas of the diocese and with meditations specially written for these times. In particular, I ask you to invoke the protection of St Joseph on 19 March and during this Year of St Joseph and as we begin a special Year of the Family which has been proclaimed by Pope Francis to begin on that date.

Also, during Lent, I invite you to participate in a series of online webinars on awakening our baptismal call to parish ministry. I don't have to remind you of the challenges facing our parishes with the ever-decreasing number of priests and that new models of pastoral ministry

will have to be developed in each parish and between parishes. These 3 talks on 24 February, 10 March and 24 March will be an opportunity to listen and to learn more about how we will renew our Church, prayerfully and pastorally, into the future. Lent, a time of renewal, is a good moment to reflect on this ongoing dialogue; a time for us to walk together in prayer, listening to the Holy Spirit as we journey towards the Easter Triduum at the end of Holy Week.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, over the course of this Lent we will hear the words of Scripture speak to us of God's closeness; that God has made a covenant with us and that he has sent his Son so that through him the world might be saved (cf. John 3:14-21). Jesus is the new covenant; a covenant brought to its fulfilment in his passion, death and resurrection. As followers of Jesus, we are called to bear witness to truth, mercy and love. Lent is always a good time to begin again on that journey. This year, amidst all the suffering and anxiety of so many, I invite you, wherever you may be in terms of your own journey, to take up that ever-present invitation; to turn around and walk with Christ – that, in the words of today's Gospel acclamation, he may 'enlighten the eyes of our mind so that we can see what hope his call holds for us' (cf. Ephesians 1:17-18).

Yours in Christ,

+ Larry Duffy

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Bishop of Clogher

Sunday, 14 February 2021.