



## Bishop of Harrisburg

March 3, 2011

My brothers and sisters in the Lord,

*“Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.” (Is 53:11)*

As we begin the season of Lent, I want to encourage you to use these next six weeks as a time of prayer and reflection on what God has done for us in and through the suffering, death and resurrection of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. As the Church begins to prepare for the solemn celebration of Easter, each of us is invited to deepen our commitment to living out the Christian life that has been given to us in Baptism. This Christian life is nothing less than a sharing in the Divine Life of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The season of Lent has a certain penitential aspect to it: we are called to recognize that, while we have been given a share in the risen life of Christ through Baptism, too often our lives do not reflect the values and moral principles which are integral to this new life in Christ. For this reason, the Church invites us during this time of prayer and reflection to reform our lives based on those Gospel values taught to us by Jesus and to turn away from sin that separates us from the very life the Lord wishes to share with us. For Ash Wednesday has reminded us, “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.”

Therefore, it is a time for honesty. When we are honest with ourselves, we know that, too often, we are not the people the Lord calls us to be. Too often, we do not work consciously to help build up His Kingdom, as He asks. Too often, we happily claim the name of Catholic but fall short in daily living out our faith. The Good News is that the Lord already knows this. He knows that we are weak and sinful. This is why He sent His Son into the world, *“not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”* (Jn 3:16) Thus, we are a people who proclaim the death of Jesus. We acclaim His suffering and death as atonement for our sins and our failures as God’s people. At the same time, we are also a people that acknowledge that our God is loving and merciful. He constantly calls us to new beginnings. Lent is one of these new beginnings that invites us to start anew on the road leading to a fuller share in the resurrected life of Jesus, fulfilling the promise God has placed in each one of us to truly be His adopted sons and daughters in Christ.

Traditionally, the Church offers us three practices to follow as we journey the path through Lent. They help us to embrace more fully the gift of eternal life given to us by God and they help us to be transformed more into the likeness of Jesus, the Son of God. These three practices are prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

## Lenten Pastoral Letter for 2011

### PRAYER

As we look at the life of Jesus, we see that communion with God the Father through prayer was an integral part of His human life. The Gospel accounts speak frequently of Jesus retreating to a quiet and deserted place to pray. Often, we are told, He would spend significant time in prayer (*cf.* Mk 1:35; 6:46; Lk 5:16). In those moments, we can find the Lord Jesus encouraged by the Father to fulfill the work He was sent to accomplish. I am sure that the Lord Jesus shared with His Father the particular challenges that He was facing and, perhaps, asked for advice and help in accomplishing the Father's will (*cf.* Lk 22:41-44). Prayer strengthened Jesus to say, "*Let it be as you would have it, not as I. ... Your will be done!*" (Mt 26:39, 42) In one particular account, we are told that Jesus spent a night on the mountain in prayer and discernment prior to calling the Apostles to be His close collaborators in the work of the Gospel (Lk 6:12-16). Thus, through the example of Jesus, the disciples themselves came to recognize the importance of prayer and repeatedly asked the Lord, "Teach us to pray." (Lk 11:1)

During the season of Lent, the Church encourages us to follow the example of Jesus and to deepen our own prayer life. Just as the Father accompanied Jesus during His earthly life through the communion of prayer, He will accompany us on our earthly pilgrimage through prayer. We simply need to take the time and allow Him to be part of our daily life. I ask you to make a commitment this Lent to setting aside a period of time each day or evening when you can open your mind and heart to the Lord in prayer. This does not need to be a long period of time. Great blessings can come from setting aside fifteen or twenty minutes to be in prayerful communion with the Lord. Let your prayer be simple, taking the Bible as a starting point and reflectively reading a passage. Use your imagination and quietly think about the scene and what the Lord wants us to know about Him through His actions or through His words in the scene you contemplate. As Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his 2011 Lenten message, "the Gospel texts ... lead us to a particularly intense encounter with the Lord." This is the power of prayer.

### FASTING

The Church points to another practice taken from the life of Jesus that can also help us during the Lenten season. We are given the opportunity to enter into periods of fasting. We see clearly in the life of Jesus that He fasted before He undertook His public ministry; He spent forty days in the desert in fasting and prayer (*cf.* Mt 4:1-17; Mk 1:12-13; Lk 4:1-13). Fasting helps us to rely more fully on God and to appreciate more deeply the gifts God has given us in our life. When we fast from food and drink, we grow in our awareness of the God who calls us to life and who sustains us each and every day. Pope Benedict XVI instructs us in one of his previous Lenten messages that denying material food, which nourishes our body, nurtures an interior disposition to listen to Christ and to be fed by His saving word. Through the practice of fasting, we allow the Lord to come and satisfy the deepest hunger that we experience in the depths of our being: the hunger and thirst for God. The Psalmist's words become our own, "*Athirst is my soul for God, the living God.*" (Ps 42:3)

## Lenten Pastoral Letter for 2011

While the Church asks us to fast and abstain from meat on the six Fridays of Lent, I would suggest something more: that each person might consider fasting at least three days a week, eating only one full meal a day and not eating between meals. The other two meals that one eats during the day should not equal the full meal. In this way, we can start to appreciate more fully the teaching of Jesus that “man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Mt 4:4)

### ALMSGIVING

In suggesting almsgiving to us as another appropriate practice to foster during Lent, the Church encourages us to become more aware of our need to care for the poor and the suffering in our world. God, Himself, reveals to us that He has a special love for the poor and the downtrodden. In the Scriptures, Jesus constantly calls those who would be His disciples to develop a special affection for the poor (*cf.* Lk 6:20-22, Mt 8:20; Mk 12:41-44). Saint Paul reminds us in his writings that one of the marks of the authenticity of his apostleship is the effort he made to collect alms to be used for the poor (*cf.* 2 Cor 9). We know that Saint Paul, when coming to Jerusalem to explain his work among the Gentiles, was told by the Apostles to make sure that his ministry was “*mindful of the poor.*” (*cf.* Gal 2:10)

During Lent, we have the opportunity to confirm our discipleship of the Lord through almsgiving. Through the sacrifices we make to help the poor, we can enter more deeply into the life of God, who “*is love*” (*cf.* 1 Jn 4:8), and become instruments of His love and mercy in our world.

### GIVING UP GUILT

Often, many entering into the spirit and Lent decide to give up something from their normal routine as a sacrifice to God. It may be a favorite food or beverage. It may be some activity that they enjoy doing. For some, this has become an annual ritual. While I do not want to discourage this type of penance, especially if it helps one spiritually enter into the season, I do want to suggest something that each of us might consider giving up this Lent. I invite you to “give up your guilt.” What does this mean? This is something I have prayed about and thought about for some time. It seems to me that there are many people carrying around with them a burden that is at once not necessary and, at the same time, stifling their growth in the Christian life and their relationship with God. This Lent, give up your guilt and lay your burden aside so that you may live out “*the glorious freedom of the children of God.*” (Rom 8:21)

To find this freedom, look to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. I know that there are a good number of people who have not been to the Sacrament of Penance for a significant period of time. There are also some people who have used the Sacrament of Penance in recent times but have not been entirely honest in their confession. Perhaps there has been some sin or evil committed in the past that they were not able to confess and they continue to carry around that burden with them. Consequently, they feel guilty and do not enjoy the peace and serenity that the Lord wants them to have.

## Lenten Pastoral Letter for 2011

This can be compounded by the antagonism of the devil who continues to accuse them as being unworthy of God's love or that the Lord will never forgive.

This Lent, I am suggesting that we give up any guilt we may have about our past failures and sins and come into the healing light of the love of Jesus Christ. Remember what He tells us, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.*" (Mt 11:25-30) Through the confession of all of our sins, we replace the heavy burden of guilt with the light yoke of the Lord's love and peace. For this reason He has come, as Isaiah prophesied, "*Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.*" (Is 53:11) Rather than deciding on something to give up this Lent or finding another Lenten sacrifice, let us give to the Lord the sacrifice He desires from us. Through the words of Psalmist, the Lord tells us what He desires more than anything is "*a humble and contrite heart.*" (Ps 51:19)

It is my prayer, that during this Lenten season, every Catholic in the Diocese of Harrisburg will take the time to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. I ask you to rediscover the magnificent gift that Jesus gave to us on the night of His Resurrection when He breathed upon the Apostles and told them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them; whose sins you retain, they are retained." (Jn 21:23) This forgiveness is the real fruit of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. For, it is the love of God poured out on us through Christ Jesus in the sacramental life of the Church. If we do nothing more than celebrate the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation this Lenten season, giving up our guilt, I am sure that it will be more than a sufficient offering to please the Lord.

In closing, I ask Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to accompany us on our Lenten journey so that on Easter morning we may be surrounded by the light of her risen Son and filled with His peace.

Sincerely yours in Jesus,

+ *Joseph P. McFadden*

Bishop Joseph P. McFadden  
Bishop of Harrisburg