

## **Lenten message of the Holy Father**

*Lenten message for 2003  
Pope John Paul II  
Vatican 6-Feb-03.*

1. Lent is a season of intense prayer, fasting and concern for those in need. It offers all Christians an opportunity to prepare for Easter by serious discernment about their lives, with particular attention to the word of God which enlightens the daily journey of all who believe. This year, as a guide for our Lenten meditation, I would offer a phrase taken from the Acts of the Apostles: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). What we have here is not simply a moral exhortation or a command which comes to us from without. The inclination to give is rooted in the depths of the human heart: Every person is conscious of a desire to interact with others, and everyone finds fulfilment in a free gift of self to others.

2. Our age, regrettably, is particularly susceptible to the temptation toward selfishness which always lurks within the human heart. In society generally, and in the media, people are bombarded by messages which more or less openly exalt the ephemeral and the hedonistic. Concern for others is certainly shown whenever natural disasters, war and other emergencies strike, but in general it is difficult to build a culture of solidarity. The spirit of the world affects our inner propensity to give ourselves unselfishly to others and drives us to satisfy our own particular interests. The desire to possess ever more is encouraged. Surely it is natural and right that people, by using their own gifts and by their own labour, should work to obtain what they need to live, but an excessive desire for possessions prevents human beings from being open to their Creator and to their brothers and sisters.

The words of Paul to Timothy remain relevant in every age: "The love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs" (1 Tm 6:10)!

Exploitation of others, indifference toward the suffering of our brothers and sisters and the violation of basic rules of morality are just a few fruits of the thirst for gain. Faced with the tragic situation of persistent poverty which afflicts so many people in our world, how can we fail to see that the quest for profit at any cost and the lack of effective, responsible concern for the common good have concentrated immense resources in the hands of a few while the rest of humanity suffers in poverty and neglect?

Appealing to believers and to all people of good will, I would like to reaffirm a principle which is self-evident yet often ignored: Our goal should not be the benefit of a privileged few, but rather the improvement of the living conditions of all. Only on this foundation can we build that international order truly marked by justice and solidarity which is the hope of everyone.

3. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." When believers respond to the inner impulse to give themselves to others without expecting anything in return, they experience a profound interior satisfaction.

The efforts of Christians to promote justice, their commitment in defense of the powerless, their humanitarian work in providing bread for the hungry and their care for the sick by responding to every emergency and need draw their strength from that sole and inexhaustible treasury of love which is the complete gift of Jesus to the Father.

Believers are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, who, in perfect obedience to the will of the Father, emptied himself (cf. Phil 2:6ff), and humbly gave himself to us in selfless and total love, even unto death on a cross. Calvary eloquently proclaims the message of the Blessed Trinity's love for human beings of all times and places.

St. Augustine points out that only God, as the Supreme Good, is capable of overcoming the various forms of poverty present in our world. Mercy and love for one's neighbour must therefore be the fruit of a living relationship with God and have God as their constant point of reference, since it is in closeness to Christ that we find our joy (cf. *De Civitate Dei*, X, 6; CCL 39:1351ff).

4. The Son of God loved us first, while "we were yet sinners" (Rom 5:6), with an unconditional love which asks nothing in return. If this is so, how can we fail to see the season of Lent as a providential opportunity to make courageous decisions inspired by altruism and generosity? Lent offers us the practical and effective weapons of fasting and almsgiving as a means of combating an excessive attachment to money. Giving not only from our abundance, but sacrificing something more in order to give to the needy, fosters that self-denial which is essential to authentic Christian living.

Strengthened by constant prayer, the baptised reveal the priority which they have given to God in their lives.

The love of God poured into our hearts ought to inspire and transform who we are and what we do. Christians must not think that they can seek the true good of their brothers and sisters without embodying the charity of Christ.

Even in those cases where they might succeed in improving important aspects of social or political life, without charity every change would remain short-lived. The possibility of giving oneself to others is itself a gift which comes from the grace of God. As St. Paul teaches: <sup>3</sup>God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure<sup>2</sup> (Phil 2:13).

5. To modern men and women, often dissatisfied with a shallow and ephemeral existence and in search of authentic happiness and love, Christ offers his own example and issues the invitation to follow him. He asks those who hear his voice to give their lives for others. This sacrifice is a source of self-fulfilment and joy, as is seen in the eloquent example of those men and women who, leaving all security behind, have not hesitated to risk their lives as missionaries in different parts of the world. It can also be seen in the response of those young people who, prompted by faith, have embraced a vocation to the priesthood or the religious life in order to serve God's plan of salvation. It is likewise the experience of the growing number of volunteers who readily devote themselves to helping the poor, the elderly, the sick and all those in need.

Recently, we have witnessed a praiseworthy outpouring of solidarity for the victims of floods in Europe, earthquakes in Latin America and Italy, epidemics in Africa, volcanic eruptions in the Philippines, as well as for other areas of the world scarred by hatred, violence and war. In these situations, the communications media play a significant role by allowing us to identify with and offer ready help to the suffering and those in distress. At times it is not the Christian command of love, but rather an innate sense of compassion which motivates our efforts to assist others.

Even so, anyone who helps those in need always enjoys God's favour. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that the disciple Tabitha was saved because she had done good to her neighbour (cf. 9:36ff). The centurion Cornelius obtained eternal life on account of his generosity (Ibid., 10: 2-31).

For those who are "far-off", service to the needy can be a providential path leading to an encounter with Christ, since the Lord abundantly repays the good deeds done to one's neighbour (cf. Mt 25:40).

It is my fervent hope that believers will find this Lent a favourable time for bearing witness to the Gospel of charity in every place, since the vocation to charity is the heart of all true evangelisation. To this end I invoke the intercession of Mary, mother of the church, and pray that she will accompany us on our Lenten journey. With these sentiments I affectionately impart to all, my blessing.