



# PROVINCIAL CIRCULAR



SALESIAN PROVINCE OF BANGALORE

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## **LENT, A TIME TO INTENSIFY OUR COMMITMENT TO CONVERSION**

Ash Wednesday has ushered in the holy season of Lent, a 40-day period of preparation for Easter during which the "...Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert." (CCC 540). With the austere symbol of the ashes, we entered into the period of Lent, beginning a spiritual journey which prepares for a worthy celebration of the Paschal Mysteries. The ashes are a sign reminding us of our status as created beings and inviting us to penance and to intensify our commitment to conversion as we continue our sequela Christi.

The history of salvation has given the desert a profound religious meaning. Under the leadership of Moses and later, enlightened by the prophets, the chosen people were able, amid privations and sufferings, to experience God's faithful presence and His mercy. They fed upon the bread which came down from Heaven and quenched their thirst with the water gushing from the rock. The People of God grew in faith and in hope of the coming of the Messiah who would redeem them. It was also in the desert that John the Baptist preached and the crowds came to him to receive the baptism of repentance in the waters of the Jordan. The desert was the place for a conversion aimed at welcoming the One who comes to triumph over sorrow and death which are the wages of sin. Jesus, the Messiah of the poor whom He fills with good things (cf. Lk 1:53), began His mission by sharing the lot of those who are hungry and thirsty in the desert.

### **A Privileged Time of Interior Pilgrimage**

Lent is a journey. It means accompanying Jesus as He travels to Jerusalem, the place where the mystery of His Passion, Death and Resurrection unfold. It reminds us that Christian life is a 'road' to be travelled, consisting not so much in the observance of laws as in the person of Christ Himself, who must be encountered, welcomed and followed. It is a providential gift from the Lord and a precious opportunity to draw closer to him, turning inward to listen to his promptings deep within. Lent is a privileged time of interior pilgrimage towards Him who is the fount of mercy. It is a pilgrimage in which He Himself accompanies us through the desert of our poverty, sustaining us on our way towards the intense joy of Easter. Sadly, there is always the temptation to become lukewarm, to quench the Spirit, to refuse to invest the talents we have received for our own good and for the good of others (cf. Mt 25:25ff.). All of us have received spiritual or material riches meant to be used for the fulfilment of God's plan, for the good of the Church and for our

personal salvation (cf. Lk 12:21b; 1 Tim 6:18). The spiritual masters remind us that in faith life those who do not advance inevitably regress.

## **A Journey of Accompanying Jesus**

Yet the Lenten journey is not simply walking in some subjective direction. Rather, it is a specific direction in which we ourselves, body and soul, accompany Jesus, truly existing in and through him, at one with him. It is an existential action, formed in the fires of passionate love, in which we fervently and truly commend our spirits unto Christ. Our own life is our gift, however small, given back to our Saviour who poured out his own blood upon the wood of the cross – the forever infinite and incomparable gift to humankind. By inviting us through the discipline of Lent to tread the paths of love and hope marked out by Christ, the Church makes us realize that Christian life involves detachment from superfluous goods and the acceptance of a poverty, which sets us free and enables us to discover God's presence and to welcome our brothers and sisters with an ever more active solidarity and in an ever-wider fellowship.

## **The Three Pillars of the Lenten Journey**

Traditionally, the three pillars of the Lenten journey are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These are ways to renew our love for God and love for others. Prayer is time spent with God. Giving alms is a concrete expression of compassion for fellow beings. Fasting is a combination of the two. We fast to create more interior room for God through a symbolic participation in the redeeming, sacrificial love of Jesus, which allows us to share in the suffering of others. Pope St. Leo the Great tells us, "... there are three things which most belong to religious actions, namely prayer, fasting, and almsgiving ..." and, "This threefold round of duty, dearly beloved, brings all other virtues into action: it attains to God's image and likeness and unites us inseparably with the Holy Spirit. Because in prayer faith remains steadfast, in fasting life remains innocent, in almsgiving the mind remains kind.

With an eye to deepening our understanding of these Lenten practices, Pope Francis explains that fasting involves "learning to change our attitude towards others and all of creation, turning away from the temptation to 'devour' everything to satisfy our voracity and being ready to suffer for love, which can fill the emptiness of our hearts". Prayer teaches us to "abandon idolatry" and our false sense of self-sufficiency. In prayer we acknowledge our need for God and his mercy. Almsgiving helps us to escape from the madness "of hoarding everything for ourselves" without giving a thought to the needs of those around us. Almsgiving means sharing of what we have with those in need. By means of these disciplines, we rediscover "God's plan for creation and for each of us, which is to love him, our brothers and sisters, and the entire world, and to find in this love true happiness."

## **An Invitation to Pay Close Attention to the Love of Jesus**

Why did Jesus suffer so much in His bitter passion? St. Ignatius of Loyola gives us two fundamental reasons: 1) To show us the malice and evil of the reality of sin; 2) to show us the depths of His love for all of humanity and for each one of us individually. During

these six weeks, we are invited to pay close attention to the love of Jesus that led him to do so much for the good of others. His love for us was profoundly rooted in his love for and obedience to the Father. Jesus' love was practical and concrete – in the way he received all who came to him for healing and forgiveness, in his teaching and especially in his passion and death. So, as close disciples of Christ we are reminded to give greater attention to the needs of others and show greater willingness to offer physical or emotional assistance.

One sin we seldom reflect upon is the sin of omission. Where do we fail to love? How many opportunities do we miss each day to follow the interior prod to love, to act for the good of another? Prayer and fasting make us more sensitive to these movements of the heart. In daily life, there are so many small sacrifices that annoy us, that we simply endure. This Lent, let us see these daily crosses – of tedious work or disappointments – as opportunities to better appreciate and participate in the cross of Jesus for the good of others.

### **A Time to Develop a Disposition of Detachment**

Lent is a time of profound truth, which brings conversion, restores hope and, by putting everything back in its proper place, brings peace and optimism. The spirit of penance and its practice impel us to detach ourselves sincerely from our unnecessary possessions and sometimes even from our necessary ones, which prevent us from really “being” as God wishes us to be: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Is our heart attached to material wealth, to power over others, to subtle ways of dominating? If so, we need Christ, the Easter Liberator, who, if we wish Him to, can free us of all the bonds of sin that hold us fast. Lent is a time that makes us jointly responsible for one another; it detaches us from our selfishness, small-mindedness, meanness and pride; it is a time that enlightens us and makes us understand better that we too, like Christ, must serve.

### **A Time for Conversion and Reconciliation**

Lent invites us to reflect on the great need of the Sacrament of Confession in our lives. Pope Pius XII reminded the faithful as well as all the people many times that the great sin of our age is, in fact, the denial of sin. The sacrament of Confession is the ordinary means for the forgiveness of mortal sins committed after Baptism. It is also a veritable treasure trove of graces and spiritual strength for us in our daily struggle against sin and temptation. Jesus said to His apostles in the garden of Gethsemane, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41). All of us feel the attractive power of sin in our lives. All of us have to struggle to control our disordered passions. There's always the danger that we can give in to temptation and fall into mortal sin in a moment of weakness. Therefore, there's an ongoing need for repentance in our lives.

The conciliar decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* states: “The repeated sacramental act of penance, prepared for by a daily examination of conscience, is a powerful incentive to the essential turning of the heart to the love of the Father of mercies.” Our Constitutions art. 90 outlines a programme of efforts needed for reconciliation and emphasizes that “this commitment to conversion on the part of the whole community is brought to its fulfilment by the sacrament of Reconciliation.” The expression *‘this commitment to*

*conversion on the part of each member and the whole community'* not only emphasizes the communal dimension of the penitential process, but also fits well with the two forms of the celebration of Reconciliation, individual and communal, with appropriate frequency.

### **Don Bosco's Emphasis on Confession as a Road to Holiness**

We cannot conclude without a further reference to our Founder for whom the process of continual conversion, the effort to defeat sin and be ever more closely conformed to the divine model, were essential features not only of his own holiness, but also of the kind of holiness he proposed to his boys. A familiar scene is the one that represents Don Bosco while confessing his boys. We know that he let himself be photographed on condition that he had his boys next to him. We can imagine how many wanted to pose next to him. This explains why they are so crammed together and close to Paul Albera who seems to be kneeling to make his confession. That photograph recalls Don Bosco's joy in confessing his boys and also the sacrifice he endured of spending long hours in this ministry.

The great esteem that Don Bosco had for the sacrament of confession climaxed in his making it one of the columns of his educational system. For Don Bosco, the Sacrament of Penance along with the Eucharist formed the two columns on which his preventive system was based, and the sure way to holiness. *"Do you want to become saints?"* he once asked a group of boys; *"here is the secret. Confession is the lock; confidence in your confessor is the key. This is how you open heaven's gates"* (BM VII, 37). The biographies he wrote of some of his boys – Dominic Savio, Francis Besucco and Michael Magone – are all hymns of praise to Confession as a road to holiness.

Don Bosco not only exercised the ministry of confession, but he also carried out a tireless work of practical and pastoral instruction to guide the faithful and especially the young to an increasingly fruitful practice of this sacrament. In his book on the life of Saint Dominic Savio, Don Bosco wrote: *"It is proved by experience that the most valid supports of youth are the sacraments of confession and communion. Give me a young man who attends these sacraments, you will see him grow up in his youth, reach adulthood and arrive, if it pleases God, until late old age, with conduct, which is the example of everyone who knows him"*. Don Bosco who was the confessor of Dominic Savio tells us about his frequenting the sacraments of confession and communion: *"Before Savio came to stay at the Oratory he attended these two sacraments once a month, according to the use of the schools. Then he attended them with much greater diligence. One day he heard this maxim from the pulpit: Young, if you want to persevere in the way of heaven, they recommend three things to you: go to the sacrament of confession often, attend holy communion, choose a confessor to whom you dare to open your heart, but do not change him without necessity. Dominic understood the importance of these counsels"*.

Don Bosco emphasized with his boys the importance of choosing a confessor, who becomes the spiritual guide, the doctor and friend of the soul, who helps them to discern the gifts that God gives to each one and the project he has for each one. He wrote of Dominic Savio: *"He began to choose a confessor, whom he regularly kept all the time he lived among us. So that he could then form a just judgment of his conscience, he wanted, as he said, to make the general confession. Then he began by confessing himself every fifteen days, then every eight days, communicating with the same frequency"*. Don Bosco wrote thus in the life of Dominic



Savio: *"He had an unlimited confidence with him. Indeed, he spoke to him with all simplicity about things of conscience even outside of confession"*

With regard to the frequency of the meeting with the Lord in the sacrament of Penance, we may recall that Don Bosco once said in a Good Night: "If you care but little for your soul, go once a month; if you want to save your soul but are not too eager about it, go every other week; if you want to aim at perfection, go every week. Do not go more often, unless your conscience bothers you" (BM XII, 415). My dear Confreres we shall be careful not to underestimate the necessity of frequenting the Sacrament of Confession in our personal lives, which is essential to our life and commitment to daily conversion as well as to our pursuit of perfection as religious and priests. May this season of Lent be a time for us to deepen our conviction about the need of this Sacrament and resolve to make it a practice without any negligence. Ultimately, personal conversion is the path to greater participation in our life in Christ. May we each experience that grace this Lent, that we may be prepared to celebrate with renewed zeal the resurrection of Jesus Christ this Easter. In a spirit of prayer and commitment let us listen carefully to the words: "Behold, I am at the door and knock" (Rev. 3:20). Yes, it is the Lord Himself who knocks gently at the heart of each one of us, without forcing us, waiting patiently for us to open so that He can come in and sit down at table with us. Let those of us who are priests constantly remind ourselves that we should be always available to administer this Sacrament whenever called for, following the example of Don Bosco our model.

## **Conclusion**

Let us invoke our Bl. Mother, the Mother of Mercy, to strengthen us during this holy season of Lent. She knew the Father's loving plan and was the first to welcome it; she believed and she is "*blessed among women*" (Lk 1:42). She was obedient in suffering and so was the first to share in the glory of the children of God. May Mary comfort us with her presence; may she be "a sure sign of hope" (*Lumen Gentium* 68) and intercede with God, that there may be for us a fresh outpouring of divine mercy. Let me conclude with the words of Pope Benedict XVI: "On this Lenten journey, let us be attentive to welcoming Christ's invitation to follow Him more decisively and coherently, renewing the grace and commitments of our baptism, so as to abandon the old man who is in us and clothe ourselves in Christ, thus reaching Easter renewed and being able to say with St. Paul "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

Affectionately in the Lord,

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Provincial.