

Pastoral Letter for the First Sunday of Lent 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On this first Sunday of Lent, I want first of all to thank you and congratulate you on the enormous generosity you have shown in supporting the CAFOD appeal for the people of Haiti, so recently devastated by the earthquake. I asked you at short notice to respond to this appeal in a special Sunday collection, and so far from parishes all round the Archdiocese, you have given £84,000 to that appeal. In these very difficult times financially and economically, that is a truly magnificent response. I take this opportunity to express my heartfelt thanks and deep gratitude to you all for your generosity.

To me this is one of the very clear signs of the living and vibrant faith of our Catholic community in this Archdiocese, of which the Holy Father spoke when we, the Bishops of England and Wales, made our Ad Limina Visit to Rome in late January and early February. The Ad Limina Visit takes place every five years. Two of the most important elements of that visit are firstly, a pilgrimage to, and the veneration of, the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul; secondly there is a personal meeting between individual bishops and the Holy Father.

In his final address when he met us all together at the end of our visit, he said: "Even amid the pressures of a secular age, there are many signs of living faith and devotion among the Catholics of England and Wales. I am thinking, for example, of the enthusiasm generated by the visit of the relics of Saint Therese, the interest aroused by the prospect of Cardinal Newman's beatification, and the eagerness of young people to take part in pilgrimages and World Youth Days. On the occasion of my forthcoming Apostolic Visit to Great Britain, I shall be able to witness that faith for myself and, as Successor of Peter, to strengthen and confirm it. During the months of preparation that lie ahead, be sure to encourage the Catholics of England and Wales in their devotion, and assure them that the Pope constantly remembers them in his prayers and holds them in his heart."

Pope Benedict went on to encourage us "to draw on the considerable gifts of the lay faithful in England and Wales and see that they are equipped to hand on the faith to new generations comprehensively, accurately, and with a keen awareness that in so doing they are playing their part in the Church's mission."

He urged us to "encourage the lay faithful to express their appreciation of the priests who serve them, and to recognize the difficulties they sometimes face on account of their declining numbers and increasing pressures. The support and understanding of the faithful is particularly necessary when parishes have to be merged or Mass times adjusted." He also asked us to

"spare no effort in encouraging priestly vocations and emphasizing to the faithful the true meaning and necessity of the priesthood."

So, shortly before Lent, Pope Benedict has given us all words of encouragement and also a challenge. If we are to fulfil the mission of the Church to proclaim the gospel, we need to ask God to deepen our faith, to strengthen our hope, and help us to be generous in our love for him and for one another. We need courage too if we are to be steadfast in holding to the truths of our faith and remain loyal members of the Church which Christ founded.

The season of Lent is a time for us to focus once again on the meaning and purpose of our lives, and to resume our journey of faith with renewed conviction and vigour. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the means by which we can open ourselves to God's grace and let him renew and rekindle our baptismal commitment, a commitment which was sealed and strengthened in Confirmation. So I ask you to pray especially today for all those who are seeking baptism or full communion with the Catholic Church. Many of them will be participating in the Rite of Election in the Cathedral this afternoon, together with their sponsors and members of their families. These are people who have been searching, sometimes for many years, and through God's grace, their own perseverance, and the help and support of others have come to the point of asking for baptism or to be welcomed into full communion and be Confirmed at Easter.

Lent is given to us by the Church to help us to know God better, a time for turning our hearts more fervently to him who, in the words of the Psalmist, is "compassion and love, slow to anger and rich in mercy." He is the one who "does not treat us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our faults", but, rather, the one "who crowns you with love and compassion." And he dearly wants us to reveal his love and compassion to the world in which we live. He wants us to "incarnate", to embody that love and compassion in our relationships with one another and particularly to express it in a practical way to those who are in any kind of need. He commands us to use generously the gifts and talents we have received from the Holy Spirit for the building up of the community of his Church, to help build that communion of love and compassion which reflects the very life of the Trinity. It is in living our faith with courage that we proclaim the Gospel and so fulfil the mission of the Church in which we all have our unique contribution to make.

With every blessing for Lent and Easter,

+ Peter

Archbishop of Cardiff