

PASTORAL MESSAGE FOR LENT 2015

FASTING: Waiting - Anticipation - Feeling at Home - Forgiveness

Dear Christian brethren,

At the start of Holy Lent 2015, and in preparation for the journey we shall make together during this time, I wish to share this short message with each and every one of you.

On one occasion, the Pharisees and Scribes questioned Jesus as to why his disciples were not fasting: Jesus answered, "Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast" (Lk 5, 33-35).

When I take into consideration the present circumstances of the Church in Malta, this analogy of Jesus often comes to mind. As you are aware, last year, on October 18th, Pope Francis accepted the resignation of Archbishop Emeritus Paul Cremona O.P. On that same day, the Pope nominated me as Apostolic Administrator. For the Diocese of Malta, this was the start of a time of prayer and waiting. We can also describe it as a moment of 'fasting', because our bridegroom was taken away and now we are awaiting the nomination of a new Archbishop who represents Jesus, the bridegroom of the Church, in our midst. For this reason, this moment is like a moment of fasting.

At this historic moment in the life of the Diocese, the word 'fast' also led me to reflect upon four aspects of Lent. The word 'fast' (in Maltese, 'sawm') is made up of four letters which bring to mind Waiting (Stennija), Anticipation (Anticipazzjoni), Shelter (Wens) and Forgiveness (Maħfra). May I ask that, when you pronounce the word 'sawm' in Maltese, you think of these four aspects which I wish to share with you.

The 'S' in the Maltese word 'sawm' brings to mind 'waiting' (stennija). First of all, as we await the new Archbishop, we need to pray fervently. This same prayer is a form of 'waiting' for this gift which comes from God. When we pray for the grace of a new Archbishop, we are in fact acknowledging in full faith

that this is a gift which comes from the hands of God. This prayer must be offered with faith in the goodness of God our Father, in serenity and without troubled hearts and undue worry. In this way, our prayer and waiting will reflect a mature detachment that will help us accept that the person who will be nominated is a gift from God, which person we will welcome.

This attitude of great maturity leads us to the second letter of the Maltese word 'sawm', the 'A' for anticipation (antiċipazzjoni). What am I trying to say? First of all, without yet knowing who the new Archbishop will be, we need to prepare ourselves to adopt a positive outlook towards him who will be called to be our shepherd. Basically, we need to look at Jesus, the Good Shepherd, because he is in fact our Shepherd. I can look at the chosen one and say 'I do not like him very much' or 'He does not really appeal to me', yet a mature faith compels me to look at him and say 'Jesus is speaking to me through him, Jesus is guiding me through him because Jesus is the Shepherd'. This attitude of anticipation translates into a faithful commitment, a commitment in which there is no room for discouragement. At the same time, this attitude sets us free, allowing us to be sons and daughters, not bound to the person of the Archbishop, but to Jesus Christ. Whoever our Archbishop shall be, I will look at Christ, because he is the one who leads me and guides me.

The third letter of the word 'sawm' reminds me of the Maltese word 'wens' which elicits the idea of a comfort zone, feeling at home. Our community needs to grow in a spirit of making everybody feel at home. It needs to welcome every person who knocks on the doors of our heart so that we may welcome everyone with a heart-warming love which leads to charity, where one can feel welcome, whoever he/she may, from wherever he/she may hail. Making people feel at home means that our love towards others is inclusive, irrespective of the life history of the other person, his/her background, his/her religion – or lack of it, his/her culture or his/her country.

We are not a Church made up of perfect people, and Lent reminds us precisely of this. As we heed the Word of God and prepare ourselves to renew our baptismal vows, we are called to remember that we are indebted to God for his mercy and therefore, we too need to be welcomed. Our life history is

marked by so many moments in which we felt loved by God. This love encourages us to proceed on our journey, even during those difficult moments when we have to bear our cross, moments in which we are sometimes unable to feel God's presence in our lives, or we do not feel it as much as we would like to.

The last letter of the Maltese word 'sawm' is the letter 'M', and most particularly during Lent, this reminds me of forgiveness (maħfra). I wish to present to you four aspects of the word 'forgiveness'.

The first. When I ask for forgiveness I am committing myself to win-over evil by the good that is within me and around me. Let me give an example. In life, we win over a bad habit by replacing it with better options; a bad habit is eliminated by a good one. We win over the bad by the good! Forgiveness also means that I refuse to pay back that person who did me harm, because unless I do so, then I would not be winning-over what is bad by something good, rather I would be creating a vicious circle of pay-back which may even be the cause of generating further pay-back and violence.

The second moment of forgiveness is to understand that I need to let out any wrong-doing from my life. The words of Jesus to the woman who was caught in adultery were "Go, and from now on, sin no more" (Jn 8,11). The word 'go' was an invitation to freedom through which the woman was given the right to carry on living, because Jesus did not condemn her to death. But Jesus also commanded her to sin no more, to transform her life, so that she would be able to lead a better life. This commitment restrains us from taking advantage of God's mercy or from approaching the Sacrament of Confession as a 'cheap grace', something which comes at little cost.

The third moment of forgiveness is the ability to share with my brethren that which I ask of God, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Mt 6,12). How can I go before the Lord, burdened with my sins, and ask for forgiveness if I am not prepared to forgive those who are indebted towards me? Therefore, the third moment in this journey of forgiveness is my disposition to share with others that which I receive from the Lord. He forgives

me and so I must forgive the other. In this way, I become a true son of the Father and part of God's family, because I treat others in the same way that He treats me.

The fourth and final point is the greeting of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday, a greeting which resounds for fifty days of joy, following forty days of penance during Lent, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20,21). "Peace be with you" is not a gift which is granted to individuals, but to the community. The forgiveness which I am offered and for which I work during Holy Lent - through the Sacrament of Confession, by performing acts of charity with my brethren, by controlling the evil within me - is a true recipe of peace, the source of peace in society.

I cordially wish you all a Lenten season which is filled with holiness and a fresh awakening of the spirit and of the heart.

I impart upon you my Pastoral Blessing.

Today, 10th February 2015, Solemnity of St Paul's Shipwreck.

✠ **Charles Jude Scicluna**

Titular Bishop of San Leone

Apostolic Administrator of Malta