

My dear people of God, today is the first Sunday of Lent. The season of Lent is a preparation for the Easter celebration. It is a time to imitate Jesus spending forty days in the desert. Jesus fasted in the desert, and overcame the devil's temptations (Mk.1:13). Lent is an invitation for us to take the courageous step of "**going into the desert**" and not hiding from what lies hidden deep within us. It is a period where we ought to allow our sins and weaknesses to come to the surface so that we can deal with them and allow them to be healed by the grace of God. It is only when we admit our sins that we would try to overcome them. If we remain in denial, we miss receiving the grace of God to heal us and to renew us and to make us whole. During Lent, we say no to the devil's temptations to continue committing sin; instead, we trust in our heavenly Father like Jesus in the desert.

As followers of Christ, many trials and troubles may beset us, each and every day, People will "test our patience", boundaries, love and so on and so forth. We will find ourselves tested, tempted to anger and impatience, by members of our own family, our friends, our classmates and our co-workers. We must follow the good examples of Jesus. In response to the Tempter, Jesus turned to His Father in heaven. Satan was offering Jesus **an easy, spectacular, superficial and astounding way of life**. Jesus' response was to remain faithful to His Father. Remember that Satan is also known as the Great Seducer, the one who seeks to remain in power and control by capitalizing on our human weaknesses. He hides his real agenda, his lust for power, behind our human weaknesses. "**Oh, everybody's doing it, so I can also do it**" is the sentiment that Satan puts deep within us all. Typical example is everybody is going for communion.... But what about being faithful to what is right no matter how many people don't care about what is right?

Again, Lent is a golden opportunity to review our past and make useful resolutions for our future. Since the early centuries, the Church has suggested three things that we undertake during Lent - **prayer, fasting and almsgiving**. It is for this reason that the Gospel text for Ash Wednesday every year is Jesus' advice on prayer, fasting and almsgiving (Matt 6:1-6, 16-18). During Lent, we **must read our Bible and pray more, as well as fasting and helping the poor**. From the spiritual point of view, fasting symbolizes our dependence on God. It expresses the fact that we really are trying to put God first in our life. The **Bible tells us that fasting from food must go together with fasting from sin, violence and oppressing people** (Is.58:3-12). In other words, when we fast from food it is to be accompanied by a loving and forgiving attitude towards others. So let us do our best to fast in a way that is genuinely pleasing to God.

Beloved in Christ, today's Gospel also contains an invitation for us to turn to God. Jesus begins his ministry by inviting all to repentance, because '**the time has come and the Kingdom of God is close at hand**' (Mk.1:15). God wants all people to repent of their sins that they may be forgiven. God longs to forgive the sins of everyone who repents, for we are all his children. God's mercy is boundless that is why Jesus is inviting all of us to conversion. '**Repent and believe in the Good News; the Kingdom of God is close at hand**' (Mk.1:15). Jesus invites, urges and pleads with everyone to turn away from sin, and this is not for fear of being punished but **to enable us to enter into the kingdom of God**. Jesus invites everyone to take decisive steps: to repent, that is, to break away from sin once and for all. **It means a total conversion**. The word conversion means to change direction, to retrace one's own steps. The fact is that, by sin man walks away from God; **conversion means to turn around and start walking in God's direction, ever coming closer and closer to him**. Indeed, as long as we persist in sin, we are unable to follow Jesus; the chains of sin prevent us from walking after Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, **God is calling everyone to conversion not only in Lent but all the days of our life**; no one is excluded. In fact, the whole Scripture is a continuous invitation to repentance. God, through his prophets, **continue calling everyone to abandon sin and come back to him**. The readings of today make the point abundantly clear that eight people saved at Noah's time prefigured baptism... (1 Pt.3:21). Indeed, through baptism all of us have made covenant to God to walk in His ways. Therefore, let us use this period of grace to amend our lives and walk in God's direction so that our lent, fasting and prayers would be acceptable to God. Amen!