

**PASTORAL LETTER FOR LENT 2008
BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF MALTA
AND THE BISHOP OF GOZO**

“What do you want?” “What are you looking for?”

Dear brethren in the Ministerial Priesthood, in Consecrated Life, and in Baptism.

Lent is one of the strongest moments during the year to help us join our daily living with our faith in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead. This year, by this letter, we, as bishops, wish to make an invitation especially to those still familiar with the Church as well as to those who, for possibly various reasons, have distanced themselves from it.

During the last two years, we have witnessed a wave of enthusiasm in our islands that has filled us with courage. We have been filled with a good measure of courage and hope because we could perceive that, in the hearts of many, there is a genuine search for that which is true and beautiful. In the experiences and faces of a good number of people we met, we could see how much our people still expect from the Church. This lays on us a greater load of responsibility towards you.

A beautiful challenge: prayer, fasting, and charity

In a fine moment when our society and culture have gone and are still going through changes that, at times, can confuse us, we can imagine Jesus turning to us, as he once did to Andrew and Simon, and asks us: “What do you want?” “What are you looking for?” We wish to present this same question to you in this year’s Lenten period. Once again, we have to let the Word of God speak and enlighten us on what is in actual fact happening around and in us to find out what we are looking for, what we are expecting from life, what is the redemption and the cure that the Lord is still offering us.

What are we looking for in life? With what are we filling the void that we frequently experience? What are we expecting from the Church? No one can escape such questions. And we, responsible for our ministry as Bishops, wish to have a strong enough faith so that, in the face of all that which people today need and are searching for, we repeat Peter’s gesture to the beggar who stood everyday by the temple door. When Peter got near, he looked at him and said: “I have neither silver nor gold, but I will give you what I have: in the name of Jesus the Nazarene, arise and walk!” (Acts 3).

We do not wish to go on listening to the Word of God, one period of Lent after another, without realising what is going wrong in our lives. The Lord wants us to turn to him because through him and with him our life can be different and better. Every year, Lent is introduced with the words of the Prophet: “Rend your hearts and not your clothing”, and with those of St Paul: “Befriend God”. How can we hear these words and all seems to remain the same? Prayer, fasting, and charity are three weapons which the Church, right from the beginning of its history, presented to us, because to do good one has to struggle and be strong enough spiritually. Without God’s power, we shall be weak. And it will be easy to be carried away by the

currents, and for our faith to be reduced to nothingness.

So that we are not distracted

We need a new evangelisation and a solid catechesis so that our faith will never become a superficial belief separated from our life-style. Because if we do not grow in faith, even our own religion can be a distraction in our life. In the light of all that today is weakening our faith, we again wish to make our own Peter's invitation: "In the name of Jesus the Nazarene, arise and walk!" When we look around us, together with so much goodness, there are also many things that worry us. We feel that our people are going through the same experience of faith and weakness that the Jewish nation went through as described in Scripture. The Jewish people lived in slavery, went through a long and dangerous journey in the desert during which the Lord taught them with a lot of patience until they reached the promised land and gained full freedom. But that freedom was lost in a short time, and it was only after the bitter experience of exile in Babel that the people were able to rise again and mature in their belief in the God of history.

During Lent, the words slavery, desert, promised land, freedom, and exile will frequently be echoed in the Word of God which we shall hear. For us, these will not only be words or an experience of someone far away from us. We too, as Maltese and Gozitans, are going through historical moments when that which we always believed is being put to the test by the way we are living in the face of today's requirements. We frequently get mixed up in what we want and what we are looking for and we fail to see any meaning in the faith we received. We are confused on which are the values that can keep us united, and which are the virtues that can support us so that our society will be one that enhances our dignity and not one which debases us and renders us victims.

Compared to neighbouring nations, we are still a very religious race. But we wish that what we profess will be put into practice more concretely and be seen in our actions. Our country is asking those who state they have faith, that they give an uncompromising and clear witness resulting in actions that make the Gospel of Jesus Christ more credible. And this is the service and orientation that the Church wants to offer to society that frequently loses its bearings. Peter makes a similar invitation to the first Christians encouraging them to "Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have" (1 Peter, 3,15).

We all know that, in the near future, we shall have an electoral campaign. We wish, for example, to see more reciprocal respect and love in discourses and judgments. Diversity is an important element in a democracy. But political maturity demands that the discussion is more concentrated on arguments and points of view than about persons. As much as our country, being so small, can gain if partisanship does not go to our head, in the same way we have much to lose if we persist in politicising everything.

The urgency for a sound catechesis

When the Jewish nation was weak or too much sure of itself, it was easily overpowered by its neighbouring enemies and finished in exile at Babel where it lost

every identity. We habitually pride ourselves on our generous and open heart as a nation or on our identity as a Christian people. But today, this is not enough. The forces that surround us are strong. Evil is very strong. Sin still exists and where it abounds, it dominates the heart of man. Our choices, the compromises of values we embrace, our usual lifestyle, all can, as they did to the Jews of old, lead us to an exile similar to theirs.

Compromise weakens the fibre of our lives, that of our family, and of society, and brings destruction in our hearts and destroys identity. So that this does not materialise, we have to be prepared. We Bishops are witnessing and feeling the urgency of a sound education in faith that makes us really adult Christians. We promise to work with a serious undertaking for a sound catechesis at every level, from the young in schools and parishes to adult age.

Today we form an integral part of a continent that has much to offer - so long as we have the wisdom and the power of discernment to remain capable of choosing between good and evil, between that which makes us more of authentic and that which disfigures us as a nation and as individuals. We feel that the Prophet Isaias' warning when he says: "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter" is topical (Isaias 5,20). We fully believe in the love of God that is greater than any evil and sin. We strongly believe in the power that comes from this love if and when we open fully our heart's door to it. It is this power that together as a Church we have to rediscover, we together with you and you with us. We need this power to rise and walk and to realise that not every choice and every life-style are compatible with Christian faith and the following of Jesus.

Today, in the type of culture we live in, it is the very meaning of man's life that is under threat. And when one's life ceases to make sense, one will then be in exile where, as the Psalm states, one does not see any sense in turning to God to honour or pray to Him (Psalm 137). Today, God is being ignored. Many people live in a way as if God does not exist. We wish to extend our Lenten invitation even to those who feel far away, so that they will rediscover God's face and heart which can give full meaning to our lives. We also exhort those who feel that they are committed Christians, to discover more the sense of mission towards those who feel that God does not make much sense in their lives.

In a God-less society and culture, it is man himself who ends up disfigured and wounded. Even among us, the loss of the sense of God is increasing the number of those who are wounded, hurt, and victims. These are all symptoms of slavery. It is from this kind of slavery, from these pains and wounds that the power of the Word of God, if rediscovered, can free us. Today we repeat to Maltese society and to all those who, even if they have distanced themselves, wish to let Christ to come near and touch them to be healed, the "arise and walk" which Peter said to the beggar. We the Bishops renew our commitment toward you so that the name of Jesus be more known among us, and so that our country will have the Church it really needs.

We impart to you our pastoral blessing as a pledge of every heavenly good.

Today, 25th January 2008,

Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle

✠ Paul Cremona O.P.
Archbishop of Malta

✠ Mario Grech
Bishop of Gozo