

**PASTORAL LETTER FOR LENT 2009
BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF MALTA
AND THE BISHOP OF GOZO**

**NEED OF A FUNDAMENTAL
CHANGE IN OUR CHRISTIAN LIFE**

Dear brethren,

The Church in our dear islands is currently having two beautiful experiences which can easily be linked to the Pauline Year we are celebrating as a Universal Church. We are referring to the pastoral visitations being carried out in the Diocese of Malta and the Diocesan Mission in Gozo.

Closer to you

At the beginning of Holy Lent, we would like to speak to you about these experiences which, we can tell you right away, have left a pleasing effect in us. They filled us, bishops, with great joy, strengthened us in our Faith and encouraged us to continue working with all our might in the field of the Lord for the good of all. We would like to make our own and repeat the words our Father St. Paul the Apostle said after his pastoral visit to the Philippians: *I thank my God whenever I think of you, I pray with joy, remembering how you have helped to spread the Good News from the day you first heard it right up to the present....And God knows how much I miss you all, loving you as Christ Jesus loves you.* (Ph 1, 3-5.8).

As much as you have always been in our hearts as your bishops, that which we are witnessing in these pastoral visitations in Malta and the Diocesan Mission in Gozo continues to pull us towards you through the heart of Jesus Christ. We would like to make use of what St. Paul had to say to the Philippians: *My prayer is that your love for each other may increase more and more and never stop improving your knowledge and deepening your perception so that you can always recognise what is best.* (Ph 1,9). We are certain that, in the remaining pastoral visitations and as the Diocesan Mission develops, we will continue having experiences that will make us happy and for which we should thank God.

Accordingly, let us take the opportunity of Lent to continue filling ourselves with holy enthusiasm, and so grow in our recognition of the Mystery of Our Lord Jesus Christ while being strengthened in our Faith.

To you our Christian brethren

With these thoughts in our hearts, through this Letter, we would like to first address those baptised who have Jesus Christ in their hearts and who are continuously and genuinely striving to live more profoundly their Christian Faith. The true Christian is not satisfied with the minimum or with very little, but fully commits himself to follow Christ together with the Church.

But it is also our desire that some verses in this Letter reach the heart of those who are at the farther end of the Christian community, so that the Grace of God pulls them once again towards the Heart of Christ in the embrace of his Church which continues to love them as her sons and daughters although they have somewhat distanced themselves.

Thanks to God, many were those who recently have returned to the Lord within the Christian community, including a good number of young people who have realised that their life only makes sense if they have Christ in their heart.

Let us take this occasion to remember that the centre of Lent is the Easter Mystery which is the suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We celebrate this Mystery every Sunday in the Mass. Therefore, the first step we have to make during Lent is above all to ensure never to miss Sunday Mass and to participate fully in it so that we live this Mystery in the Christian community. During Mass, we have to let Christ reach our hearts and change our lives. Therefore, we have to go to Mass predisposed and prepared. We have met various experiences of genuine efforts by priests and laity towards celebrating Sunday Mass in a way where the presence of God is really felt, and where there is an experience of Faith. We would like to encourage this.

The Easter Mystery in all our life

During Lent, we have a number of manifestations that remind us of this Mystery and which are to be recommended: pilgrimages of penance, the Way of the Cross, the visitations to various churches on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter processions. While encouraging these manifestations to continue with the utmost of devotion, let us allow them to instil the Easter Mystery deeper in our hearts and to help us give witness to it in our daily lives.

We, who believe that Christ has risen from the dead, have the power received through baptism to courageously face all kinds of suffering in the knowledge that we are going to benefit from it in everlasting life. We do not fear, not even death: on the contrary, death fills us with the zeal to live a good life and to do whatever good we can because we believe that all this translates to our benefit in heaven our homeland.

Always deeper, then, the mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Christ should mean to me that I have to die with Christ for my old life, and to resurrect with Christ to a new life of Grace. I have to be ready to change and convert, and not expect Christ to change in his teaching to accommodate me according to the type of life I design for myself in line with my exigencies. Some people, although they have not abandoned Faith and Religion, feel just the same that they can choose what they want from it: what to keep and what to discard. These people have yet to arrive at the stage of making a leap in their Faith which allows them to accept Christ in full. They would have changed the centre of their Faith: instead of having Christ at the centre, they put themselves in the centre.

Therefore, in the Creed that we recite every Sunday during Mass, we profess these two mysteries together, linked to each other:

I believe...(that) for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again...

I believe... (that) he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead...And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

If I fail to effectively implant in myself these two mysteries, this would mean that my Christianity not only does not have the acceptance of the Mystery that is Christ, but also lacks the acceptance of the Mystery that Christ is in me. It would mean that my Christianity needs to change from its foundations.

The example of Paul

During this Lent, we have to go deeper into the meaning of these mysteries and see how they are reflecting themselves in our lives. Do I believe in eternal life? Do I think about this reality: how is this Mystery affecting my life?

Our Father St. Paul made Christ and eternal life the centre of his life. Therefore, at the centre of his life, there was no longer himself and his life on this earth. St. Paul says: *For me life is Christ, and death is gain.* He was ready to pay any price to obtain Christ and eternal life. Christ's cross started to make sense for him all the more as the meaning of his personal life in Christ.

Our life today as Christian sons and daughters of Paul

Therefore, our Faith is strong when it is built on this Easter Mystery. We were ourselves baptised, and we baptised our children in this Mystery.

We have many Christian brethren who cooperated with the Grace of God and succeeded in building their life on this Mystery. We met many, among them a good number of young people, who decided to follow the Lord and design their lives according to his model. Some of them had spent some time away from him in the periphery of the Church, but today they are back in his embrace. Today they are saying, with St. Paul: *Nothing therefore can come between us and the love of Christ* (Rm 8, 35). As they say, 'I have never had so much peace in my heart as I have now that I have Jesus in it'. These people died in Christ for their past life to live the life of Grace. They are not in any way sorry for all that they left behind because it only used to leave them with great emptiness, while Christ fulfils their life.

We met persons who are burdened with suffering: because of sickness, or because of problems in the family, or because of difficulties at their place of work that is causing them a lot of stress. Although their suffering is great, because they built their lives on the Mystery of the Cross through which Christ won over sickness and death and over all kinds of suffering, from their mouth one only hears nice words of hope in the Lord. They are confident that the Lord knows what they are going through, is always with them and continuously sustains them to be able to overcome it; they believe that their suffering is beneficial for their salvation and that of others.

We met married couples who built their lives on Christ in the Sacrament of Marriage and remained faithful to the promise they made at the Altar. Some of them had to go through difficult moments in their matrimonial relationship and family life.

An invitation to all

We invite one and all to follow the example of our Father St. Paul the Apostle and his warnings so that, with our lives, we send a message to the culture of our time that Christ's teaching, with the values it transmits, is the way that truly leads to the common good where everybody may be able to see his or her life having a full meaning. We should not feel reluctant and be afraid to be different from others, because we have a message to transmit for the good of all: the message of the Gospel; the Easter Mystery. The culture of our time must understand that the relativism it proposes will lead us nowhere and is not going to make humanity happy.

When the human person starts doing whatever comes to one's head without any control whatsoever, this instils a big void in one's life because one would not have a direction to follow. The human person needs something certain and sound on which to build his or her life, and this is given to us by the Faith in God.

It is the responsibility of every Christian to live this mystery and transmit this message by word of mouth, but much more so through the way he or she lives. We have to be the first to give more importance to what belongs to the spirit than to material things. We have to show that our joy does not come from things of this earth but from heaven. St. Paul says to the Colossians: *Since you have been brought back to true life with Christ, you must look for the things that are in heaven... not on the things that are on the earth* (Col 3,1). Through us, God can save many of our brethren and stop them from getting lost in the relativism of contemporary culture. We can do this if we always keep in mind and heart the Mysteries of our Faith.

Our brethren in Faith, let us during this Lent take a decision, as individuals, as families, as Church in Malta and Gozo, sons and daughters of St. Paul and in Joshua's words in front of the Jewish People in the Sinai Pact, say: *But if you will not serve Yahweh, choose today whom you wish to serve... As for me and my House, we will serve Yahweh* (Jos 24,15).

We impart to you all our pastoral blessing.

Today, 18 February 2009,

✘ **Paul Cremona O.P.**
Archbishop of Malta

✘ **Mario Grech**
Bishop of Gozo