



## PASTORAL LETTER FOR LENT 2015

**Bishop Mario Grech**

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### **CHRIST WIPES AWAY THE TEARS**

In my life as a priest I have seen persons weeping with happiness; but I know many who cry because of a broken heart. While it is normal for us to share with others our joy in happy moments, many a time, when we are visited by serious difficulties we weep alone, because the human has a natural inclination to try to hide this intimate reaction and also, at other times, because a person finds no one to weep in sympathy.

#### **Tears**

In the meetings I am having with you during the Pastoral Visit, particularly in the visits to families, I am coming across heart breaking situations.

There are those who are at the end of their tether through feelings of guilt because they cannot forgive themselves for some wrong they committed in the past.

I remember the sick persons I found with their face covered by the bed sheet to hide their eyes brimming with tears through pain or because they had lost all hope of recovery.

I met those people who had asked and were still begging for money to pay for treatment.

I visualise those persons who are unemployed, those who have precarious jobs or who suffered injustice.

I have in mind those couples who cannot form a family, or who have offspring with severe disability or serious illness.

How can I forget those families experiencing separations? Years pass with parents and offspring remaining estranged, blood relationships become poisoned and grandparents and grandchildren never meet.

Then there are those who are suffering because they feel sidelined, if not also condemned by others because of the particular life style they chose, or those who had been married and are now in a second relationship.

There are those who would become speechless when they are hurt by others because of the colour of their skin.

### **The Lord weeps with us**

I want to encourage those who weep. I wish to remind them that if we humans do not take notice of them and leave them to wail on their own, God loves them so much that He bends over them and cries with them. A certain Rabbi narrates that when Moses was dying he was suffering so much through fear that God had mercy and came down to speak with him face to face, suffered with him and wept for him<sup>1</sup>. And in the Book of Psalms we find that when we weep, God collects our tears in a bottle, counts our tear drops one by one and takes note of them in his book (see Psalm 56:9) That is how close to God is whoever is weeping.

During Lent we are invited to open our hearts to God's word which has the power to console. At this time we read the story of when Jesus the raised Lazarus from death. That day Jesus wept, not so much because his friend was in the grave but because he was moved when he saw Mary and her relatives cry. Faced by their weeping, Jesus "was greatly distressed" (John 11:13). Jesus was not ashamed to show his sentiments when faced by human suffering. In the person of Jesus weeping with those who weep, those who were present felt the heart beat of God, so much so that they said about Jesus: "See how much he loved him!" They had a glimpse of God opening his arms wide to embrace the ones who were oppressed and "wipe away all tears from their eyes" (see Apoc. 7:17).

Whatever the reason for the tears in your eyes, God who is weeping with you wishes to let you savour his compassion and mercy. His tears mix with yours and transform salty tears to sweet tears, because divine tears are the dew of the Holy Spirit<sup>2</sup>.

### **The tears that wash out guilt**

This applies to every kind of wailing, but mostly if our weeping is the silent cry due to all kinds of spiritual weakness we might have. In fact, it is not once or twice that, when we come face to face with our spiritual sickness, or when we find ourselves in circumstances that contrast with the teaching of the Gospel, we breakdown into a profound bout of crying. Even in these situations, when around us or perhaps within ourselves there is the smell of moral and spiritual death, God would be close to us, he

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<sup>1</sup> Paolo De Benedetti, *La morte di Mose ed altri racconti*, 2005

<sup>2</sup> According to Oriental spirituality.

lets us cry over him and wet his feet with our tears. That is what he did with the well-known sinful woman who sought him out in the house of Simon the Pharisee: “She waited behind him at his feet, weeping, and her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them away with her hair” (Luke 7:38). Her sincere tears reveal the strong emotion this woman felt when her eyes met the meaningful look of mercy and commiseration of Jesus, who does not judge her, nor does he ignore her, but accepts her as she is. Jesus understood that her weeping was her prayer<sup>3</sup>; her weeping was the sincere language of a sorrowful and contrite heart. Since her weeping was her confession, she obtained forgiveness. Because, as Saint Ambrose says, “tears do not request forgiveness, but obtain it”. Tears wash away guilt.

The same happened to Saint Peter in the yard of the high Priest after he had denied Christ three times. There Peter also wept tears of blood “with a broken heart” (Luke 22:62). I do not exclude that Peter remembered the words of the Lord that are: “Return to me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with wailing” (Joel 2:12). But I also believe that on that day Peter shed also tears of joy because he felt so happy and grateful that, in spite of his deficiency, Jesus cast upon him a look of love. It was that look full of God’s mercy that moved Peter with happiness. The tears of sorrow changed to tears of awe. Blessed are those who bewail their guilt, because a light from heaven changes the tears of sorrow to those of joy<sup>4</sup>.

In life it often happens that we notice some things only if our eyes have been wetted by tears. That is what happened to the sinful woman and Peter: When their eyes were washed with tears, they saw the holiness of God and the ugliness of sin. Moreover, tearful eyes may soften the hard heart of man, both of the person who weeps and of the one who causes the weeping. Since weeping is a pure experience of love,<sup>5</sup> the streaming tears help the weeping person become docile so that he would tolerate the weakness of others, forgive those who had hurt him and forget the ugly past. Only tearful eyes can perceive the pain in the eyes of their neighbour and dispel his hurt look. Whoever resists weeping has a problem seeing and easing his own weakness and that of others.

Saint Ambrose writes that, in the Church, conversion occurs in water or in tears<sup>6</sup>. Here he refers to the water of Baptism – an experience that we renew in the Vigil of Easter – as well as the tears that occasionally fill our eyes when we go to confession. I appreciate a lot those cases when the Lord places near me in the confessional penitents crying through sorrow and joy. Lent is a time of grace where we can make this conversion of tears by celebrating the sacrament of Confession.

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<sup>3</sup> St. Robert Bellarmino

<sup>4</sup> Symeon the New Theologian

<sup>5</sup> St. Augustine

<sup>6</sup> Ep. 41,22.

## **We weep with those who weep**

It is a fact nowadays that, through their egoism and indifference, many are not prepared to weep with those who weep. Very few people give their time for someone who weeps. This behaviour exposes the fact that human poverty is increasing. Although, on the one hand, crocodile tears have become more evident because there are those who know too well that if they do not cry they would not suck from either Private entities or from Government, on the other hand, there are others whose tear ducts seem blocked or their hearts have become hard as stone. These are capable of closing their eyes and ears when faced by the real suffering of the others. And so, nowadays there are many who weep alone.

It is necessary for us to learn to weep with whoever has a yoke on his shoulders. If we do not learn to weep with those who weep, we would not be good Christians. Jesus, in whom God's sweetness and goodness became flesh, did that. He felt his heart ache for that family who had lost its daughter, he was touched by the sight of the widow from Nain on the way to bury her son (see Luke 7:13), moved by mercy he healed a leper (see Mark 1:40), felt sorry for the herd dispersed and confused for lack of a shepherd. Today Jesus continues to show us the face of the Father with the heart of a mother overflowing with gentleness and compassion. He, who does not bear seeing mankind weeping, will do for us what he did in Palestine: he gives support to the breaking family, provides for the hungry, heals all kinds of sickness, and encourages those who are disillusioned with life to start living again.

It is right that we, who in Saint Paul's words should have the same sentiments of Jesus (see Phil 2:5), make an effort to, like Jesus, weep with those who weep and, also like him, help to overcome their heart-breaking suffering. How much am I weeping for those living in solitude, those who are ignored by their loved ones, those who have suffered some failure, the poor and those in the risk of poverty, those who are estranged or abused? How interested am I in those who were robbed of their private property or their good name, or those who are abused at work? How much do I care for those who are denied their rights or who feel discriminated against through the abuse of political, financial, judicial, scientific or institutional power? In other words, how much am I supporting those who are crucified by their human brothers? We would be supporting them if, driven by the Gospel values, in a spirit of solidarity, we give them personal attention and love them, while at the same time address the structural causes of poverty and abuses that are making a suffering society. Whoever recognises and wipes away these tears would be performing a great act of the charitable work that the Church invites us to do particularly during Holy Lent. It is this love toward neighbour that "covers many sins" (1 Pt 4:8).

## **A Church that hears the Weeping**

Also in the Church, there are people who are weeping. There are those who are seeking bread (the Word of God) but are receiving a "stone"; there are those who

wish to celebrate the sacraments but cannot; there are those who yearn for a renewed Church but is finding strong resistance; there are those who have been confused by the bad example of some of us priests; there are those who trusted us but were deceived; there are those who were flabbergasted by the separations and piques among us; there were some who cracked and were shown the main door. Jesus weeps on this type of Church as he wept over Jerusalem. In Pope Francis's words, Christ wept over the Holy City because it was so content about itself that it did not realise that Jesus was at its door with his hand on the knocker; because it was so self satisfied, Jerusalem did not feel the need to open for him.<sup>7</sup> It chose to isolate itself. This may happen also in the Church: it folds onto itself, does not perceive what there is around it, and continues to rotate on itself being scared of moving into new ways. A Church which, in order not to change established pastoral schemes and retain the certainties of the past, preferring to close its eyes to the signs of times, is a Church to weep over.

Apart from this, if our Church does not have all doors open so that whoever is weeping finds refuge (consolation) in it, we would fail in our mission as spreaders of the Gospel. Because, if we keep away from those who weep, who is going to believe and accept the Good News of Jesus Christ? The enthusiasm of those who are called to spread the Gospel depends on how convinced they are that there are persons who weep! It is a pity that there remain people in the Church who still cannot understand that work intended to reduce the suffering causing weeping is more important than any other activity. Perhaps there is also the need for those who weep to evangelise us, because in their weeping they meet Christ who weeps.

### **Those close to their suffering brethren**

My appeal is that we profit from this time of Lent so that, with God's help, there will be less weeping through sorrow and more tears of joy. I believe that with a little attention we can continue to multiply gestures that are witness to our loving and merciful heart. It is a fact that there are those among us who are prepared to suffer in order to reduce the suffering of others, like those parents who spend wakeful nights to be close to their children; those who care for the elderly in their homes, those that do voluntary work, those who regularly donate blood; those who through their work, particularly in the caring profession, give more that is demanded in order to lessen suffering; those workers who work overtime to help their needy colleagues; the members of Apostolate groups that visit the sick and elderly; and many others. Works of this nature are worthy of praise and support. Above all I make a special appeal to young people full of energy and ideals so that, while being foremost in society and in the Church to build a world wherein there will be no weeping, they are not to be afraid to take initiatives to be close to those who weep.

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<sup>7</sup> Homily, Domus Sanctae Marthae, 20.11.14

I place this reflection under the blessing of Our Lady of Sorrows, who wept with her weeping Son, wept with the disciples when after the death of her Son they remained alone, but who also wept with joy when she saw the Resurrected Christ.

Shared today, 10th February 2015, solemnity of St. Pauls' Shipwrek.

**+ Mario Grech**  
**Bishop of Gozo**