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PASTORAL LETTER
NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
6 March 2011

My dear friends

Over the last few weeks our Sunday Gospels have been taken from the Sermon on the Mount. What better preparation for Lent than to revisit what the Kingdom of God is about and its very particular demands on the way we think and act?

It is the quality of our discipleship that is in question during Lent. The enemy of being the Lord's reliable disciple is our sinfulness; and that tends to cling to us no matter what we do or how we feel. We often try to disown it, by projecting it on to others, but it will not go away until we own and repent it. The catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that Lent is about the virtue of penance which enables us to detest sin as alienating us from God. It is about the consequences of our sin, especially the social consequences because sin will always damage community.

All this may sound a little gloomy. But unless we face the reality of sin and be ready to do something about it, we can never achieve a truthful understanding of who and what we are. The readings from the Sermon on the Mount may have helped us, I hope, to revisit the main features of our Christian identity.

Our final reading from the Sermon challenges us to consider what we mean when we acknowledge God as Lord. It is not a game we play. If we hear God's word we need to act on it. The powerful image about how we build our house says all we need to know – are we building our lives as reliable disciples or are we playing games in a sandpit? That is a Lenten question.

Lent is about what God does for us, culminating in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, and our response to this loving initiative. Our response at best is three-fold – prayer, virtuous living and restraining our wayward impulses.

- **Prayer** is fundamentally recognition of God as God. It is the way we accept our creaturehood and total dependence on God. The primary form of prayer, then, is adoration and thanksgiving. This is best expressed in our corporate prayer which is the Eucharist. Lent invites us to find more time for prayer and to give that whatever priority is possible.
- **Virtuous living** is not about 'me' but about my being a clearer image of the God who loves us. Virtue is living a life shaped by love - love of God and of each other. Culturally this is not easy. Much in the world around us encourages us to do our own thing, to promote 'me' and my importance. Christ invites us to love each other, to give way to each other. The true measure of the Christian life is a love that will always be guided by the good of the other. We seek our own good by seeing to the good of our brothers and sisters. Giving alms during Lent is about that. It should not only be about giving away our surplus, but sharing all we have with those who have nothing or very little. CAFOD fast days are an important part of developing virtuous living.
- **Restraining our wayward impulses** is a fasting element in any Lent. Selfishness and the promotion of 'me' are the main tendencies that need bringing under control. Whether in the area of family or society, our selfish urges need taming. They can cause chaos in our most important relationships. The truth that comes from Christ puts us in true relationship with God and each other. Any Lenten discipline must help to put our relationships on a sound footing – love that is genuinely from God and is focused on others.

Go into Lent, then, prepared to deal with the things in our lives that are causing chaos. The church offers us a sacrament to help us with this. May we use it well during Lent and also around the year. We will never achieve a position in this life when we will not need some form of reconciliation and repentance.

May God bless you all during this forthcoming Lent.

✠ Christopher
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To be read at all Masses on the 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time