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PASTORAL LETTER
THE SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
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My dear friends

I invite you to enter Lent this year under the guidance of St. Paul. Today we have a short passage from his second letter to the Corinthians in which he proposes that Christ's unequivocal "Yes" to his Father be the model of the Christian life. Christ is the one in whom we say "Yes" to God. We are carried by Christ in making our submission to the Lord. Because of what Christ has done for us, we are enriched with the Spirit that we carry "in our hearts". In the words of the first reading this is the new deed that God does for us – dealing with our sins.

These are positive and challenging thoughts with which to embark on our annual Lenten Renewal. Lent is a time during which we not only clean up our lives because of our ambiguities (our "yes's" and our "no's"), but we also clarify our vision. Our minds need to be sorted out by contemplating the person of Jesus and everything he stands for. He stands for the big "Yes" to God. He endorses it throughout his ministry and particularly his journey to Calvary and his breaking out of the grip of death to live to God and to enable us to do the same. The Christian life is about that. Being the body of Christ, his Church, we are called to live his "Yes".

Unfortunately, it is not easy for us. We have plenty of "no's" to God. That is our sinfulness. We want to go off in different directions, most of them fairly wayward. Our Lenten discipline needs to be about our "no's", so that our "yes's" may expand. May I suggest that we could use the three ancient pillars of Lent as the structure for our discipline, Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving:

Prayer – give more time to it, preferably at the expense of those elements in our lives that we can call “having a good time”. I am not suggesting that Lent becomes a kill-joy exercise. I am suggesting that we limit and control a lot of the things in our lives that are really “a waste of time” and do us no good whatsoever. Perhaps some well focussed and organised prayer could replace some of this. Why not use the daily readings in the Lectionary as a way of prayer. Pray, however, as you can, not as you cannot! Keep in mind that prayer is at root about presence – the presence of God to us and our response to it by making it our priority.

Prayer is the launch pad for any effective and enduring discipline and changes in our lives.

Fasting – This must be handled with care, especially when there are health issues. May I suggest that we challenge the consumer in us and set aside a couple of days a week (one I suggest should be Friday) when we deprive ourselves of unnecessary food. This will enable us to give generously to CAFOD or equivalent charities, and will give us a chance to express some solidarity with the vast number of our brothers and sisters who have little or no food.

We may need to set up a more permanent challenge in our lives to ‘me’, the consumer, and in this way make our contribution towards changing attitudes to the goods of the world. These goods are destined for everybody, but a small minority - and we may be among them - always seem to have a monopoly on them. Fasting could be the gateway to ‘Living Simply’.

Almsgiving – This is deeply linked to fasting. May I suggest we become daring! Can we be brave enough not just to give away our surplus but also to share what we consider to be our necessity. Have a good search through wardrobes, larders, freezers, bank accounts and see what we can give away or share. It is sobering to realise when we embark on this path that our sharing and giving away is not just an expression of love but of justice as well. Almsgiving and fasting can both change our attitude towards other people and release us from the shackles of materialism and consumerism.

Whatever we undertake in Lent, we are challenging our sinfulness and expanding our ability to say “Yes” to God.

Finally, an ancient custom for Lent will take us to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Use this Sacrament of Mercy. We all need it and it is a powerful way of enabling us to say “Yes” to God a little more often.

May God grant you every grace, blessing and mercy as we prepare to celebrate the Lord’s great “Yes” in his death and resurrection.

✠ Christopher
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