



Lent 2019

Through the penitential season of Lent, Christians are invited each year to look deeply at the foundation of their life in Christ. Lent is a time to focus our so often dispersed attention, to cut away those things that distract us from considering what really matters in life. The great English writer, Monsignor Ronald Knox, once described Catholic education as an enterprise that allowed the students to “fly to the heart of things.” That is what Lent allows us to do: to fly to the heart of things.

Lent begins with ashes and ends with fire. The ashes we receive on Ash Wednesday are made from the palms that exemplify the fickleness of the human praise received by Jesus on Palm Sunday. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Those words remind us that so many things we waste our time on are useless; they are not at the heart of things. Lent prepares us for the experience of the Easter Vigil, when we celebrate the new life in Christ which is at the heart of things, and which is symbolized by the Easter fire, and by the Easter candle, the sign of the light of Christ, which is ritually carried into the darkened church, which then becomes bright with light as we catch the fire from the candle, and share it with our neighbour.

In order to focus our attention in Lent, the Church invites us to engage in the practices recommended by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in Chapter 6 of the Gospel of Matthew: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In this Lenten pastoral letter I would like to highlight a few ways in which we can respond to this invitation of Our Lord.

Certainly it is spiritually valuable to engage more earnestly in a life of prayer in this penitential season. There is no better time to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and we can prepare for it by a daily examination of conscience, by making the Stations of the Cross, and by the constant practice of the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Daily prayerful reading of a portion of the Bible, especially the Gospels and Psalms, will draw us closer to God, and illuminate the path ahead. And of course, until we see God face to face, there is nothing on this earth more important than the encounter with God in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, which is continued through time in Eucharistic adoration.

We can be so enslaved to our appetites, and to the things of this world, which are ultimately dust. Is it not sad that a most common way in which each of us is classified is as a “consumer”? Do I want to be remembered on my tombstone: “Here lies a consumer”? So often we think that our wants are our needs, and become slaves to our desires, weakening our will to control our appetites. In Lent we should fast in some way, so that we may become focused on what truly matters. The most obvious way is to give up some food or drink. But a more fruitful fast might be to cut back or eliminate some forms of social media, which can truly enslave us. In whatever way is most spiritually fruitful, we should do significant fasting in Lent.

Although prayer and fasting are surely important, this year I would like to emphasize the importance of almsgiving, which means a generous sharing with others, especially those in need. It may well be that the most valuable thing we can share is our time, for our lives are woven out of time, and when we give time generously to another, we give our very selves.

In this Archdiocese the primary way in which we engage in almsgiving is through ShareLife, in which we as a Catholic community reach out to care for the most vulnerable among us. As disciples of Jesus, when we make a sacrificial gift to ShareLife, we put our money where our mouth is.

One vitally important but not so well known way of making the love of Christ present in this suffering world is the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. It was founded in 1833 in Paris by a 20 year old university student, Frederic Ozanam (1813-1853), who with his Catholic friends was trying to study the



faith, and to explain the Catholic faith in the anti-Catholic university world of their day. One antagonistic student challenged them: you talk so much about your faith, but where do we see you putting it into action? Frederic and his young friends took that challenge to heart, and in addition to prayer and religious study, they headed out into the streets of Paris, offering practical assistance to those in need.

In this they were guided by Sister Rosalie Rendu (1786-1856), a Daughter of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, who had much more experience in helping those in need than did the young university students. Frederic and his companions decided to found a Society named after St Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), who in his day had offered practical service to the slaves and others in dire need.

In his brief life of 40 years Frederic became a great scholar, and a loving husband and father, and his Society spread. Dr Joseph Painchaud, a Canadian studying in Paris, was one of the many students who joined the Society, and when he returned to Canada established it in Quebec in 1846. Dr George Muir was a member of the Quebec Conference of the Society, and when he moved to Toronto established it here at St Michael's Cathedral in 1850. It has since spread throughout Canada. You can understand why I named our most recent parish "Blessed Frederic Ozanam Parish." Frederic Ozanam was beatified by Pope John Paul at the World Youth Day in Paris in 1997, and Sister Rosalie was beatified in 2003.

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in our area is engaged in numerous endeavours that serve those in need, and which are funded not only by donations to the Society, but also by the municipal and provincial governments. It operates shelters for women, a prison apostolate, supportive housing, Community Homes and recovery programs and Community Stores. Each night the Society provides emergency, supportive, and long term housing for almost 300 people. They also run summer camps for girls (Marygrove) and for boys (Camp Ozanam) supported by the Archdiocese and ShareLife.

One most visible aspect of the mission of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is the way in which it cares directly for our neighbours in need in the parish. Over 1200 volunteers make over 28,000 home visits giving assistance with food, beds, clothing and basic supplies. They visit 18,000 children, and 25,000 adults, including those who are isolated, lonely, and suffering from mental health issues.

You may well see members of the Society at the doors of the Church after Mass soliciting donations. In our diocese each year over two million dollars is raised and distributed to those in need. I very strongly urge you to donate. In so many ways, the local conference of the Society reaches out in a most practical way to serve those who are suffering, and also, of course, as with Frederic and his young friends, offers a profound opportunity for the members to grow in holiness as disciples of Jesus. There are conferences of the Society in about half of our parishes. I want a vibrant conference of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul to be active in every parish in this Archdiocese. I urge you to support generously the work of the Society and to become a member.

As we enter into the holy season of Lent this year we need to step back from the clutter and distraction of our lives, and fly to the heart of things, through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Two of the ways in which we can generously support our neighbours in need are ShareLife and the Society of St Vincent de Paul. May God give us the determination to put our faith into action by doing so.

Sincerely in Christ,

+Thomas Card. Collins

Thomas Cardinal Collins
Archbishop of Toronto