

LENT LETTER

THE LORD SAYS: RETURN TO ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART (Joel 2,12)

Dear brothers and sisters:

In this year marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are going to begin the season of Lent. The announcement of the end of the state of alarm decreed by the government will be different in each province. I regret that in some parishes it will not be possible to celebrate the Ash Wednesday liturgy. We can only hope that the state of alarm ends as soon as possible.

In the Ash Wednesday liturgy, we hear the words of the Apostle Saint Paul who says, "This is the favorable time, this is the day of salvation" (2Cor. 6,2). In this situation we find ourselves in, how do these words resonate with us?

"This time" is this moment when, somewhat distressed, we experience our weakness. Many people have lost their lives to the virus and most of the world's population is overwhelmed by the pandemic. It is true that, at this time, we are also witnessing the generosity of many people and this fills us with hope. How can we live this time, which will remain in the memory of human history, so that it become a "favorable time", a "day of salvation?"

We find some clues in the readings of the Ash Wednesday liturgy.

The first is from the prophet Joel. The prophet addresses his word to the suffering people who have gone away from the Lord's way: "Return to the Lord, your God." The prophet invites them to return to the Lord, not for fear of the punishment that may befall those who remain far from Him, but "because He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love." Joel directs this call to conversion to everyone: the elderly, children, the newlyweds, priests, everyone. It is a call to "conversion".

In the Gospel of Ash Wednesday - a few paragraphs from the Sermon on the Mount - three actions are proposed to us to live this time of conversion: prayer, almsgiving and fasting. I comment on them quickly.

"Prayer". I invite priests, religious and laity to dedicate a longer time to prayer during Lent. It is about rethinking before the Lord the situation in which we find ourselves and trying to listen

to the call that the Lord directs us through it. And, along with this, I propose that you spend some time reading the word of God that is proclaimed every day in the liturgy. It will help us deepen our experience of faith.

"Almsgiving". These are the words of Pope Francis: "Yet I would also hope that, even in our daily encounters with those who beg for our assistance, we would see such requests as coming from God himself. When we give alms, we share in God's providential care for each of his children". We must think in a particular way how to express, in this time of pandemic, this recommendation to practice almsgiving. Offering part of our time or financial aid to those who have lost their jobs, to immigrants who have difficulty in meeting their basic needs or to those who live in solitude at this time of anguish, can be some concrete actions.

"Fasting". Observing the rules of Lenten fasting and abstinence, important as it is, is not the main thing. Here too I gather some words from Pope Francis: "Fasting makes us more attentive to God and our neighbor. It revives our desire to obey God, who alone is capable of satisfying our hunger". We must think above all those people who are forced, by the circumstances of life, to fast every day because they do not have what is necessary to live. Demonstrating with concrete gestures our solidarity with them is a way of practicing the fast that Jesus asks for.

This year we are going to walk the Lenten journey amid the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope that for each one of us it will be a "favorable time" to "return to the Lord", "a favorable time" that helps us to open our hearts to the needs of others. The Pope has published, also this year, a message for Lent. I invite you to read it and meditate on it. It will help you.

I implore upon each one of you the blessing of the Lord.

Fukuoka, February 11, 2021. Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Josep M. Abella', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Josep M. Abella

Bishop of the Diocese of Fukuoka