



Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Port Pirie and Darwin

Lent in this Year of Grace

“Come back to Me with all your heart”



Dear Brothers and Sisters

In this Year of Grace it seems appropriate as Lent 2013 approaches we write this combined Pastoral Letter to you as Bishops of the Dioceses of Port Pirie and Darwin.

When announcing the Year of Grace it was said that we need as Church in Australia to take stock of ourselves and contemplate the Face of Christ, to see where He is in our hearts and in our lives. For many in our country Jesus has become simply a good figure of history, a man to be admired and whose teachings are so admirable – but nothing more than that. Yet we have the Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, for so much did God love us, at the heart of our Christian understanding.

Profound challenges face us as Church in Australia, including indifferentism to religion, a growingly aggressive secularism, a disengagement from the Church by many, especially the young who are our future, the challenge of vocations to priesthood and Religious Life, to name but some. In the forefront, as we know so sadly, is the devastation to men and women abused by Church personnel, ordained and lay, a complete betrayal of who we are as disciples of Christ Jesus.

There are a number of factors that are common to our two dioceses in their pastoral needs. Both dioceses attempt to serve relatively small communities of Catholic people spread across large distances. We have both known the suffering of victims of abuse committed in some of those communities where the social impact is greater because of the smallness of the community compared to a city. So much of our rural population is engaged in agriculture and as graziers, and we are more subject than our city neighbour to the vagaries of weather, knowing drought and flood and bushfire. Both of our dioceses face significant challenges in meeting the pastoral needs of our people. In terms of vocations it is very many years since any of our young women offered themselves for the consecrated life as Religious Sisters. We are both greatly indebted to the generosity of overseas priest coming to work with us, but neither diocese has had a native-born young man enter the seminary for over twenty years. It is an age group simply not present in our churches. Hence our two dioceses are well able to put common prayers before the Lord.

This Lent can therefore be for us a special opportunity for prayer and penance. The season commences with God's call coming to us through the prophet Joel, where in the First Reading for Ash Wednesday it states, “Come back to Me with all your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning. Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn.” There is the Opening Prayer of the first day of Lent, “As we begin the discipline of Lent, make this year holy by our self denial.”

Prayer, the giving of alms, and fasting are the traditional practices followed in times of penance by the peoples of both Old and New Testament. It is the Gospel of Matthew urging those practices that the Church has selected to be proclaimed on the first day of Lent. At the meeting last November of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, it was moved that in light of all that has been happening within and to our Church, especially the sexual crimes committed against the innocent and the vulnerable by Church personnel, offences that cry out to Heaven, our observance of Lent

should be heightened in a special way in this Year of Grace, granted our need for repentance and charity and witness.


As bishops of the dioceses of Port Pirie and Darwin we invite the clergy and faithful to abide by the practices suggested below to enable a heightened Lenten observance of prayer, fasting and the giving of alms in this special Year of Grace.

- That a Holy Hour of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament be conducted in the main church of each parish, preferably in the later part of an afternoon so that working people might participate and family time in the evening not be disrupted. It is suggested the Holy Hour should be on a day different to that one which the Stations of the Cross are celebrated, and because the liturgical principles are different, preferably should not directly precede or follow Mass.
- That an effort be made to spend some extra time in a week reflecting prayerfully on the Gospels.
- That the law for fasting, whereby we eat less at two of a day's three meals, be observed on Ash Wednesday and also all the Fridays of Lent, and on those days there is to be abstinence from meat and a refraining from rich foods. The Law of the Church requires us to fast and abstain on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday; this Pastoral Letter asks you to consider such an offering on each Friday of Lent. The spirit of these restrictions is to acknowledge voluntarily our complete dependence on God's goodness for everything we have by going without. Our discomfort has the effect of drawing our minds to being grateful that we have such an abundance of God's gifts, to use those gifts responsibly and to share them with others.
- That there be the giving of alms taking the form of a donation to Project Compassion and the special appeals for victims of flood and fire.

These actions do not make us holy. The grace of God alone does that. They do, however, indicate a heart which for the love of Christ wants to be renewed.

We commend the renewal of the Church of our dioceses to your special prayers as we journey towards the commemoration of the Lord's dying for us, and the renewal of all creation, including our Church, that was ushered in by the Resurrection of Jesus.

In the love of that same Lord, in this Year of Grace.



+ Gregory O'Kelly SJ
Bishop of the Diocese of Port Pirie



+ Eugene Hurley
Bishop of the Diocese of Darwin