



“COME BACK TO ME WITH YOUR HEART, FASTING, WEeping AND MOURNING” (Joel 2:12)

Lenten Message of His Lordship, Most Rev. Peter Ebere Okpaleke, Bishop of Ekwulobia, to the Clergy, Consecrated Persons, and Lay Faithful of Ekwulobia Diocese

We thank God for the privilege of beginning another Lenten season. This is our first Lenten season as a diocese. We thank God for the gift of our diocesan family and also for keeping us alive in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic. We pray for the eternal repose of those who have died; for God’s continued protection of the living and for a speedy end to this pandemic.

The Holy Father, Pope Francis sent us a Lenten Pastoral letter titled: “Behold we are going up to Jerusalem’ (Matt 20:18): Lent, a Time for Renewing Faith, Hope and Love.” What strikes one is that although Jesus knew exactly that the journey to Jerusalem was to lead to his death, he resolutely went nonetheless in obedience to His Father’s will. As we begin this season of grace, it is important that we decide to make the best of the opportunity offered us once more by God to renew our faith, hope and love. With the Holy Father, I emphasize the need for mindfulness; a conscious decision to seize this God-given opportunity.

The Prophet Joel articulates what we are supposed to decide about. He makes it clear that the decision needed from us is to return to the Lord. It is not the decision simply to be meticulous with the Lenten observances – prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These observances are instruments. They can bring us closer to God. But they can serve other ends too. In prayer, the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable, showed off his piety (Lk 18:9-14) which did not bring him closer to God. Similarly, many people fast, not to come closer to God but in order to lose weight and trim down. The same can be said about almsgiving. Therefore, these observances become Lenten observances if and only if one embarks on them as a way of coming back to God with all one’s heart. It is not even enough to embark on them simply because they are traditional observances.

We need to understand the meaning of this journey back to God and how the Lenten practices help us do that. The Psalmist makes it abundantly clear that

no one can leave the presence of God, however much one may struggle to. The Psalmist said: “where shall I go to escape your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I scale the heavens you are there, if I lie flat in Sheol, there you are” (Ps 139:7-8). Thus, even in sin, God still sustains the sinner because as Job put it, in God’s hand is the life of everything and the breath of mankind (Job 12:10). Yet, we read that God is at the doors of our hearts knocking and if anyone hears God calling and opens, God will come in to share a meal at that person’s side (Rev. 3:20). This draws attention to the fact that while God is always there by our side, we may not take notice; we may be preoccupied with other matters; we may be indifferent because we have other priorities. The Lenten season is a period when we are called to strive with the grace of God to become more sensitive to God’s call; to deepen our relationship with God; to surrender our lives to him; to listen with our hearts to God’s words and to live by His word.

Living by God’s word is the goal of Christian discipleship. Jesus defeated the temptation to turn stone to bread and satisfy his hunger by insisting that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt 4:4; Deut 8:3). In other words, although very hungry, Jesus had other considerations as the motivation for his action apart from personal comfort or personal survival. He put the will of His Father first. This came out clearly in the Garden of Gethsemane when he concluded his prayers by saying “not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42).

Returning to God implies investing time and energy in cultivating a personal, intimate relationship with God who is always close to us, indeed closer than our skins. It is about turning away from sin, disordered desires, addictions and superficiality. It is about embracing Jesus, the truth and walking in his way in order to gain life (Jn 14:6). It is about commitment and putting God first in all things. Religious rituals – celebrating the sacraments and engaging in pious activities – can contribute to the deepening of this relationship if undertaken not for their own sake but as expressions of and responses to the invitation to an intimate relationship with God. Therefore, as we pray, as we fast and offer alms, let us do these consciously for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31), conversion of heart, and in the service of growth in our personal relationship with God.

My prayer for you in this season is that you will grow in your personal experience of God’s love and mercy and become instruments of His love and mercy in our troubled world.

We unite our prayers with our Blessed Mother and St. Joseph her Spouse asking for the grace to make the best use of the opportunity offered us in this holy season for growth in relationship with God and with one another.

I wish you a fruitful and grace-filled Lenten season.

+ Peter Ebere Okpaleke
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the Conversion of St. Paul