

# **PASTORAL LETTER**

**H.G. MGR PAUL CREMONA O.P.**  
**Archbishop of Malta**

**H.E. MGR MARIO GRECH**  
**Bishop of Gozo**

**H.L. MGR CHARLES J. SCICLUNA**  
**Auxiliary Bishop and Vicar General of Malta**

**LENT 2013**

## A time of prayer and charity

Dear brothers and sisters,

The period of Lent has just commenced in the Liturgy of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church does not only follow the civil calendar. Human time is sanctified when the Church lives the experience of the life of Jesus throughout the Liturgical year. The Liturgical year, in its entirety, follows the Solemn Feast of Easter, that is, the authentic account of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Last Wednesday, commonly referred to as Ash Wednesday, marked the beginning of Lent, a day on which we set out to prepare ourselves for the Paschal Mystery. During the celebration of Mass, ashes were placed upon our foreheads as a reminder that we must do sincere penance as we journey along the path of Jesus – a path which led him to death on the Cross, before his resurrection from the dead.

During that same Mass, the Gospel proposed to us some good works which we may perform during Lent: prayer, fasting and deeds of charity (Mt 6, 1-6.16-18). In this Pastoral Letter we shall reflect upon the way in which Christians may lead a life of Prayer and Charity.

This is being done with particular reference to the Year of the Faith, so that we may understand better that which truly marks us as Christians, in order that we may live the period of Lent fruitfully.

### Prayer

Prayer constitutes those moments which bring us into contact with God. In order for this to happen, we need to make space for God in our lives. The more time we dedicate to prayer, the more profound will be our experience of God. “Jesus prays before the decisive moments of his mission: before his Father’s witness to him during his baptism and transfiguration, and before his own fulfilment of the Father’s plan of love by his passion.”<sup>1</sup> On several occasions, he used to go to an isolated place so that, through prayer, he could communicate with God the Father: “And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone” (Mt 14, 23). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts the question: Could it be that after seeing Jesus in prayer, the disciples were stirred by a desire to pray in order that they could become men of prayer?<sup>2</sup>

By means of prayer we build a relationship with God. Through our mutual dialogue, we are enlightened by him as we listen to what he has to say to us. In this respect, it is beneficial for us to pray with the Word of God, that our hearts may be opened to receive the truth which God the Father wishes to teach us. In the Letter in which he announced the Year of the Faith, Pope Benedict XVI encouraged us to “rediscover a taste for feeding ourselves on the Word of God, faithfully handed down by the Church, and on the bread of life, offered as sustenance for his disciples”.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise we are simply led by human reasoning and those influences which our

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para.2600.

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contemporary society proposes. We need to be enlightened by God and by his Word, that we may come to know the truth: about him, about ourselves – created in his image and endowed with an inherent dignity – and how God in his wisdom, made it clear to us that it is indeed the truth that will lead us to him.

Through his Word, God reveals the purpose for which he created mankind: his divine plan for the family as from the beginning of creation; his plan for the human person – created male and female, called to become one flesh in their love for one another, in order that they may create a nest for his children; the Church as a community where God abides among mankind; and humanity - the crowning glory of God's creation - whom he entrusted with the task of safe-guarding the rest of the created order.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray the Our Father, he revealed the proper way in which Christians should pray: “And when you pray, do not heap empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Mt 6, 7.8). The pagans believed that first and foremost, they had to convince their gods to help them; therefore they prayed using many words. Jesus explained that God does not need convincing to help us. He is our Father and knows what our needs are. So we need to pray with confidence to God the Father, opening up our hearts to his grace.

Besides those instances in which we are alone with the Father, there are other moments when we pray as a community. We are showered with new graces when we pray as a Christian community. Jesus said: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Mt 18, 20). A characteristic of community prayer is that it expresses union; the love that exists between the members of the community supplements our prayer. This happens in a particular way during Mass, where the whole community gathers around the Word of God and the Eucharist. Mass is a source of grace which is unlike any other!

We are saddened to notice that there are some people who are distancing themselves from the community and not attending Mass. This is what we read in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Do not stay away from the meetings of the community, as some do; encourage each other to go” (Heb 10, 25).

### **Charity**

In his Letter, St James says: “Take the case, my brothers, of someone who has never done a single good act but claims that he has faith. Faith is like that: if good works do not go with it, it is quite dead” (Jm 2,14.17).

When a person is blessed with God's grace, he should not regard this egoistically for his own benefit, but rather it is there to help him change for the good of his neighbour. Through Christian witness, Our Lord Jesus Christ may continue with his mission of revealing the love of God the Father to all mankind!

God invites all Christians to show their love through Faith. Christian love is not dictated solely by human emotions but it depends upon the act of Faith of the Christian; only in this way can it be an authentic: ‘charity’ and not just a philanthropic act.

The starting point of this act of Faith is the human person, created by God ‘in his image’. The foundation of Christian love is the fact that every person is created in the image and likeness of God. The Christian looks

beyond the surface of the person – skin colour, religion, race, gender. It does not matter who he or she is, because every person carries the image of God and we love God through the other person, without excluding anyone.

For this to be possible, there are four conditions which we must satisfy in order that our love may be expressed as a form of Charity:

- God must be the font of love: through the love we receive from God we are able to love others as he loves us. We experience this love in our moments of prayer, during which we open up our hearts to receive it. This love which emanates from God rises above any other form of love which, beautiful as it may be, could be marked by egoism. For this reason God tells us: “You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5, 48).
- At least once in his lifetime, before God and to himself, the Christian should make a commitment to love, without allowing his sentiments to mislead his decision to do so. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his disciples to be forgiving and generous with their love, so much so that they should not expect anything from those whom they love (see the Gospel of St Mark, chapter 5).
- The Christian is not to allow anyone or anything to deter him from transforming his heart into a nest of love. Charity is an action, not a reaction. Whatever happens, one must continue to love. The greatest example of this is found in the Crucified Christ. Jesus did not permit the cruelty and hatred of those who crucified him to influence his love: from the Cross, he forgave them and continued to love them: “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23, 34).
- The family is the ideal place for love to be transformed into ‘charity’. This is because the grace bestowed by the Sacrament of Marriage finds its foundations in this same Charity. They ‘become one flesh’ (Gen 2, 24): sharing even their faith. Charity grows in the Christian community, which provides a space for everyone to speak the same language: the language of values, which Jesus Christ himself taught us.

### **Conclusion**

Dear brothers and sisters, during Lent we encourage you to make your choices and live up to them. Only in this way can we be acknowledged as a Church which follows in the footsteps of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14, 6). Any other deeds which we perform in the name of the religion we profess must emanate from our Faith and Charity, if these are to be according to the will of God.

We impart upon you our Pastoral Blessing as a pledge of every heavenly good.

Today, 2nd February, 2013,  
Feast of the Presentation of the Lord.

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Archbishop of Malta

✠ **MARIO GRECH**  
Bishop of Gozo

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