
LENT 1997 : A TIME OF BLESSING



The 1997 Lenten period begins today. We have hardly left the Christmas season - or so it seems - that we are already called to turn our gaze toward Easter. But it is not a ceaseless, useless turning around in circles that we yearly experience; rather, like a spiral staircase we get closer and closer to the Risen Jesus.

FORTY DAYS

The Latin word for Lent is "quadragesima," which means "forty." [The French word "carême" comes from "quadragesima."] Only forty days before Easter! This forty-day period reminds us of the forty days Jesus spent in the desert, at the beginning of his public life. We are bid to live these forty days deeply united with Jesus. In his 1997 Lenten message, Pope John Paul II states that this period also reminds us of the forty years that the People of Israel spent in the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land. It was during this time that the people learned what it meant to live under a tent with no fixed abode, with no security whatever. Many times the group was tempted to go back to Egypt: there at least they did not starve to death, even though they lived on a slave diet. In the perilous desert wasteland, it was God Himself we gave food and drink to His people, it was God Himself who watched over them. In this way, the Hebrews' experience of total dependency on God was changed into a march away from slavery and idolatrous attachment to worldly goods.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

The goal of Lent is to help believers undergo a common spiritual journey towards personal conversion and this, by becoming aware of the insufficiency and precariousness of existence, and by rediscovering the Lord's providential intervention as he invites us to open our eyes and look around and respond to the needs of our most impoverished brothers and sisters. In this manner Lent also becomes a time to experience solidarity with individuals and peoples from every corner of the earth whose life is very precarious. This brings to mind the sad situation of the homeless who have no roof over their heads: refugees, displaced persons, victims of war and of natural calamities, families expelled from their homes and who cannot find suitable living quarters, and the young and old who cannot find adequate accommodations at a decent price. The Pope writes, "*The right to suitable housing must be recognised not only for the individual as a human being but also for the family made up of several people. The family, basic cell of society, has an absolute right to adequate housing so that it may achieve a true domestic communion.*"

SHARE-LENT

In several of our parishes the Share-Lent programme is being launched today to raise money for Development and Peace on behalf of Third-World countries. It is a Lenten period of sharing, and the generous support shown by Canadian Catholics has helped the Canadian Church to take on an ever-active role in helping third world countries claim their dignity. 1997 also marks the thirtieth anniversary of the creation of the Canadian Catholic Organisation of Development and Peace by the Canadian Catholic bishops. As you know, our diocese has always been sensitive to the needs of the Third World. Last December, our diocese's Development and Peace organisation and the School of Faith both shared in the Bishop Marie-Antoine Roy Prize. Once again, I encourage all of you to support the Development and Peace Organisation. "*For the world to work better, your gift makes all the difference.*"

1997 PASTORAL VISITATION

Starting this week I shall be undertaking my second pastoral visitation of the diocese; this time, I shall be visiting the Southern Victoria Deanery which is composed of eight parishes with a population of 3500 Catholics who are anglophone for the most part. I shall be visiting each parish to celebrate the Eucharist and Confirmation, meet with the local parish pastoral councils, visit the sick and the shut-ins, join in a few interfaith services, and visit with a number of organisations, according to the timetable prepared for me by the local pastors. I shall be at Maliseet on February 16 and at Aroostook on the 22nd. Plaster Rock will be visited February 23, Tilley on March 1, Blue Bell on March 2, Limestone Siding on the 8th, Anderson Road on March 9, and Perth-Andover on March 23. I shall be meeting all parish economic affairs committees in the deanery, at Plaster Rock. On February 21, at Perth-Andover, the same kind of meeting will take place with all liturgy committees in the deanery. Finally, on February 28 the deanery sacramental preparation teams and committees (baptism, confirmation, first reconciliation, first eucharist, marriage preparation, ministry to the sick, vocation ministry) will be meeting with me at Tilley. On Friday, March 7, at Limestone Siding I shall be meeting those in charge of the different organisations in the deanery. This pastoral visitation will culminate on Monday of Holy Week at Perth-Andover, where we shall be celebrating the Chrism Mass at 7:30 P.M.

A BEAUTIFUL OPPORTUNITY

"An apostolic task, a grace-filled event," this is how the Directory for Bishops describes the pastoral visitation. And this was very much what I experience in 1996 in the Restigouche Deanery. The visitation is truly an ideal way for the bishop to personally meet those in charge of parishes as well as the people of God as a whole, so as to get to know them better and hence grow together in faith, hope, and charity. The aim of a pastoral visitation is not to control. Rather, it is an instrument of the Church to help the first pastor of the diocese in his support ministry of support, comfort, and encouragement of the local pastors and those in charge of other organisations, in their following Christ. It is an occasion for looking together for the best means at hand to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. The primary aim of the pastoral visitation is to help local communities and institutions develop and grow. Pastoral charity is at the heart of this visitation. Have a fruitful Lent!

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