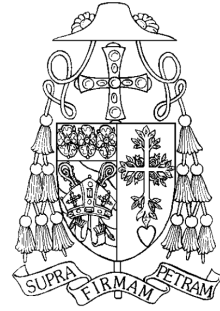


THE BISHOP'S LETTER FOR LENT, 2010

ASH WEDNESDAY:

17 FEBRUARY 2010



BISHOP'S HOUSE
P O BOX 1
LISMORE, NSW 2480

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Christ's faithful, the Laity, Religious, and Clergy of the Diocese,

As Lent commences, I write with words of challenge and encouragement for all of us to take to heart. Young or old, these forty days are to be lived as if this were to be our last Lent on this earth, and this Easter our last before we come to the eternal Paschal Feast to which our faith looks forward, the entire hope and promise of a genuinely Catholic life.

Today we prayed at Mass that our heavenly Father would "protect us in our struggle against evil." Coincidentally, Pope Benedict said just hours ago that today's ashes invite us to conquer evil and do good, to let our old selves, tied to sin, die and let a new person be born, transformed by the grace of God. The Holy Father pointed out that Lent's conversion means "going against the current when the 'current' is a superficial, incoherent, and illusory way of life that drags us down, makes us slaves of evil or prisoners of moral mediocrity."

The Gospel of the First Sunday of Lent always places before us the seductive assault which Satan made upon Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Satan has nothing to lose because already he is the loser, and as Scripture tells us, he goes about the world in great rage, knowing that he has but a short time. His lies and deceits were exposed by Christ our Lord as we hear in the gospel dialogue, but they are willingly listened to and accepted all around us up to the present, and we live with the terrible consequences.

Part of our problem in society as well as within the Church is that we've lost the sense that we have to fight, yes *fight*, supernatural enemies all around us. Of these the greatest is the Devil. "Be watchful," says St Peter, "your adversary the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith" (1 Peter 5:8-9). Long ago St Paul warned the Christians in Ephesus about the wiles of the Devil: "we are not contending against flesh and blood . . . but against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." The Apostle ends his letter with a rousing challenge to get out and fight, with the belt of truth, the shield of faith, and armed with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:11-18).

Time was when we Catholics in Australia were never afraid of a stoush for the cause of Christ and His Church, in our local community or in a wider arena. But for the most part, with outstanding exceptions, can we say that we have become blighted with timidity, afraid to be different from the secular influences around us, even sometimes within our own institutions, or even differ from Christian brothers and sisters of other persuasions with whom on some issues we must disagree? And why so frequently the sounds of silence in the face of the smart diatribes against Christianity, and especially Catholicism, in sections of the popular media? Is Satan demanding to have us, and sift us like wheat, as he did St Peter? Should we not swiftly turn to the Lord, that our faith may not fail, and gain from Him the strength to strengthen others? (St Luke 22:31-2).

The bishops are quite properly expected to make a public stand and take what practical measures we can in the face of pervasive internet pornography, demands to change the definition of marriage, and the other cultural battles around us in defence of human life. Would that we had the backing of the 26% of Australians who own to being Catholics! And surely we can only witness with a sense of betrayal people who profess to be Catholics yet who criticise the Church's authority to teach Christ's doctrine, who dismiss apostolic tradition and who routinely side with the fashionable opinions of contemporary society.

If more of us who are baptised members of Christ's body took our membership seriously, overcoming our fear to let the Word of God judge us and challenge us, we would cease to approach the Church with the attitude of consumers picking and choosing according to our taste and personal opinion. We would begin to know and love God enough to get into the fight against His adversaries and ours.

We must not be afraid of the comparison of our Christian baptism and calling with an enlistment for service and engagement in a combat – a fight towards an ultimate and assured victory which is God's alone but which in a particular place and moment depends on us. It's a long, messy and wintry campaign and there's always another battle ahead. The Devil is the most subtle of strategists and knows every trick to get us on his side, to discredit the Church, destroy morale and entice desertion.

Battles have never been won so much by great leaders as by great soldiers, the ordinary people in the trenches who conquer their fear of going 'over the top.' Lent puts a focus on our individual and more convinced conversion to the greatest of all causes. We can put ourselves on the winning side in the smallest of ways: turning from sin and making a good confession in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, resolving to take up prayer as a real weapon for the fight, challenging our self-centredness by a generous giving of alms to those in need.

The way of the Cross is central to our Lenten journey. The Cross is the shining sign of the whole army of Christians setting out over these forty days on the march to Easter. We struggle together, not alone, with renewed effort against evil, against Satan and 'the sin that clings so closely' that we each bear within (Hebrews 12:1): and all with the happy certitude of sharing in the triumphant victory of the Lamb once slain: The Lord is Risen!

With my prayers and blessing for the march ahead, and please pray for me.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Geoffrey Jarrett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a cross at the beginning.

Bishop of Lismore