

Dear Priests/Brothers/Sisters & Lay Faithful in the Diocese:

The Lenten Season: This year Lent begins on 17th February with Ash Wednesday. It is the Prophet Joel who invites us to listen to God's voice saying, "Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning; Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God." Last year on March 24, our country and the world at large came to a standstill due to the lockdown to prevent the rapid spread of the Corona virus. Due to the lockdown all the places of religious worship were closed and social gatherings had been restricted or suspended. We Christians too could not observe Holy Week services from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday. We hope that this year the situation would be better.



With Ash Wednesday we begin the Lenten Season which presents us with the three traditional pillars of penitential observance namely, Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving. Through these we Christians offer our homage to God with the three principal interests: by prayer with our souls, by fasting with our bodies and by almsgiving with our fellow human beings. The purpose of a Lenten discipline is to strip away those things which clutter one's life or impede one from being in relationship with God. It is also a time for people to experience and reflect on the sufferings of Jesus. The Lenten period is a favorable time to recognize our weakness and to accept, through a sincere inventory of our life, the renewing grace of the Sacrament of Penance, and walk resolutely towards Christ.

i. The first traditional pillar **Prayer** is our personal relationship with God. We raise our heart and mind to our Lord and Creator. The church expects us to dedicate more time to prayer during the season of Lent. Jesus stresses the importance of personal prayer. He says that we must go into our inner room and close the door and pray to God the Father in private and the Heavenly Father who sees us in private will reward us accordingly.

ii. The second traditional pillar **Fasting** is one of the most ancient practices linked to Lent. The early Church fasted intensely for two days before the celebration of the Easter Vigil. This fast was later extended and became a 40-day period of fasting leading up to Easter. Fasting is more than a means of developing self-control. It is often an aid to prayer, as the pangs of hunger remind us of our hunger for God. Fasting should be linked to our concern for those who are forced to fast by their poverty, those who suffer from the injustices of our economic and political structures and those who are in need for any reason.

iii. The third traditional pillar **Almsgiving** is simply a response by us to God, a response that we have come to through prayer and fasting. It is an expression of our gratitude for all that God has given and a realization that in the Body of Christ, it is never just "me and God." Works of charity and the promotion of justice are integral elements of the Christian way of life. It is a sign of our care for those in need and an expression of our gratitude for the things that God has given to us. Almsgiving, far from being an act of giving, is an attitude of the heart, a heart that is humble, repentant, merciful and compassionate, which seeks to reproduce in its relations with others the experience of mercy that each one of us lives in our relation with God.

This year Pope Francis has given his Message for Lent with the theme: "*Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem*" (Mt 20:18) *Lent: a Time for Renewing Faith, Hope and Love.* He writes that during this season of conversion, we must renew our faith, draw from the "living water" of hope, and receive with open hearts the love of God, who makes us brothers and sisters in Christ. At the Easter vigil, we will renew our baptismal promises and experience rebirth as new men and women by the working of the Holy Spirit.. Fasting, prayer and almsgiving, as preached by Jesus (cf. Mt 6:1-18), enable and express our conversion. The path of poverty and self-denial (fasting), concern and loving care for the poor (almsgiving), and childlike dialogue with the Father (prayer) make it possible for us to live lives of sincere faith, living hope and effective charity. Pope Francis concludes his Message saying, "Dear brothers and sisters, every moment of our lives is a time for believing, hoping and loving. The call to experience Lent as a journey of conversion, prayer and sharing of our goods, helps us as communities and as individuals to revive the faith that comes from the living Christ, the hope inspired by the breath of the Holy Spirit and the love flowing from the merciful heart of the Father."

(The Holy Father's Message is attached at the end of this Circular.)

OFFICIAL

1. Ministerial Appointments

I have appointed the following Priests to these ministerial assignments:

- Fr. I. Antony Balan as Principal of St. Joseph School Gokulnagar, with effect from January 15, 2021.
- Fr. S. George as Project Coordinator in JUST with effect from February 15, 2021.
- After being proposed by his Provincial Superior Fr. Simon Fernand is, CSC, I have appointed Fr. Thomas Pereira, CSC, as the first Parish Priest of St. Joseph Parish, Chailengta, with effect from February 21, 2021.

2. World Day of the Sick on 11th February

Since the day of its inception in 1992 by Pope John Paul II, the World Day of the Sick is celebrated every year on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes i.e. 11th February. For this year, the 29th World Day of the Sick, Pope Francis has proposed as a theme: "You have but one teacher and you are all brothers" (Mt 23:8) this is a trust-based relationship to guide and care for the sick. In his Message Pope Francis urges a path of healing grounded in a trusting and interpersonal relationship between the sick and those who care for them. He said "A society is all the more human to the degree that it cares effectively for its most frail and suffering members, in a spirit of fraternal love." Pope Francis invites everyone to assume a more humane approach to one another especially the sick and vulnerable. The core of his Message centers on the themes: Fighting hypocrisy, Sickness and faith, Closeness between the "sick" and those who care for them, fraternal solidarity and relationship. This portrays the wholeness and significance of this day's celebration which is understood not just in caring for the physically afflicted but more importantly on building up interpersonal relationships. The Pope conveys the message that other than our competence of caring professionally, what is important is the attitude of care and proximity that we show to one another. While we pray through the intercession of our Blessed Mother for all the sick people of the world and resolve to care and love them in their human dignity, we pray that we may grow in the art of loving and caring for one another and build up a healthier and more conducive environment of interpersonal relationships, love and solidarity with all.

3. Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* & the Year of St. Joseph (2020-2021)

With his Apostolic Letter "*Patris Corde*" ("With a Father's Heart"), published on 8th December

2020, Pope Francis recalled the 150th anniversary of the declaration of St Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church. To celebrate this anniversary, the Holy Father has proclaimed a special "Year of St Joseph" which began on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception 2020 and extends through to the same feast in 2021. During this Year of St. Joseph the Church also grants Plenary Indulgence to Catholics who recite the approved Prayer to St. Joseph, especially on 19th March, the Solemnity of St. Joseph the husband of Mary; on 1st May, the Feast of ST. Joseph the Worker; and on 29th December, on the Feast of the Holy Family.

4. The Year of *Amoris Laetitia* Family

The Holy Father recognizes the family's inestimable value, as a gift from God, and intends to promote a special Year dedicated to the family, which will open on 19 March 2021. This date marks the fifth anniversary of the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. Starting from the celebration of this anniversary, the Holy Father will offer the Church the opportunity to reflect upon and delve deeper into the meaningful contents of the Apostolic Exhortation stemming from an intense synodal journey, which is still ongoing within the field of pastoral care. This initiative will be called Year of "Amoris Laetitia Family" and marked by pastoral initiatives and resources shared with ecclesial institutions and families. It will end with the celebration of the 10th World Meeting of Families in Rome, in June 2022.

5. World Day of Grandparents and the Elderly

Pope Francis has also decided to institute a Church-wide celebration of a World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly. Starting this year, 2021, it will be held on the fourth Sunday of July, close to the liturgical memorial of Saints Joachim and Anne.

6. Motu Proprio *Spiritus Domini*

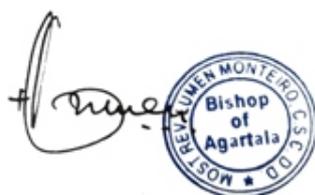
On 11 January, 2021 Pope Francis released the ***Motu Proprio Spiritus Domini***. With this Pope Francis changes the Code of Canon Law to institutionalize what is already allowed in practice: the access of lay women to the service of the Word and the Altar. It modifies the first paragraph of Canon 230 of the Code of Canon Law and establishes that women can have access to these ministries and that they be recognized through a liturgical act formally instituting them as such.

Conclusion

Dear Brothers and Sisters, each Lent is a new opportunity to look into ourselves and a new beginning of our growth in Jesus Christ. The ashes teach us that earthly realities fade away like dust in the wind. We need to turn our hearts to the things which are everlasting, which do not pass away. It is there that we will find true freedom. The Scriptural readings on Ash

Wednesday teach us that we need to examine our relationship to God (my prayer life), to neighbor (my almsgiving) and to self (my fasting). Most importantly, the depth of our spiritual life is judged by the way we treat those around us, especially our family members, relatives, the poor, the deprived, the unwanted, the weak and even the enemies. God has blessed us with so much and expects more of us, beginning with a heartfelt and spiritual "return" to Him. Let us not be satisfied with fulfilling the minimum requirements of the Lenten Season, but by taking more time to pray alone and with others. Let us discover more deeply the light within our personal darkness. Let this Lent be an opportunity to rediscover our true vocation as a true follower of Christ. I wish you a meaningful Lenten Season.

Yours in the Good Shepherd.



Most Rev. Lumen Monteiro, CSC
Bishop of Agartala

Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for Lent 2021

“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem” (Mt 20:18)
Lent: a Time for Renewing Faith, Hope and Love

Dear Brothers and Sisters,



Jesus revealed to his disciples the deepest meaning of his mission when he told them of his passion, death and resurrection, in fulfillment of the Father's will. He then called the disciples to share in this mission for the salvation of the world.

In our Lenten journey towards Easter, let us remember the One who “humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). During this season of conversion, let us renew our faith, draw from the “living water” of hope, and receive with open hearts the love of God, who makes us brothers and sisters in Christ. At the Easter vigil, we will renew our baptismal promises and experience rebirth as new men and women by the working of the Holy Spirit. This Lenten journey, like the entire pilgrimage of the Christian life, is even now illumined by the light of the resurrection, which inspires the thoughts, attitudes and decisions of the followers of Christ.

Fasting, prayer and almsgiving, as preached by Jesus (cf. Mt 6:1-18), enable and express our conversion. The path of poverty and self-denial (fasting), concern and loving care for the poor (almsgiving), and childlike dialogue with the Father (prayer) make it possible for us to live lives of sincere faith, living hope and effective charity.

1. Faith calls us to accept the truth and testify to it before God and all our brothers and sisters.

In this Lenten season, accepting and living the truth revealed in Christ means, first of all, opening our hearts to God's word, which the Church passes on from generation to generation. This truth is not an abstract concept reserved for a chosen intelligent few. Instead, it is a message that all of us can receive and understand thanks to the wisdom of a heart open to the grandeur of God, who loves us even before we are aware of it. Christ himself is this truth. By taking on our humanity, even to its very limits, he has made himself the way demanding, yet open to all that leads to the fullness of life.

Fasting, experienced as a form of self-denial, helps those who undertake it in simplicity of heart to rediscover God's gift and to recognize that, created in his image and likeness, we find our fulfillment in him. In embracing the experience of poverty, those who fast make themselves poor with the poor and accumulate the treasure of a love both received and shared. In

this way, fasting helps us to love God and our neighbour, inasmuch as love, as Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches, is a movement outwards that focuses our attention on others and considers them as one with ourselves (cf. FratelliTutti, 93).

Lent is a time for believing, for welcoming God into our lives and allowing him to “make his dwelling” among us (cf. Jn 14:23). Fasting involves being freed from all that weighs us down like consumerism or an excess of information, whether true or false in order to open the doors of our hearts to the One who comes to us, poor in all things, yet “full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14): the Son of God our Saviour.

2. Hope as “living water” enabling us to continue our journey.

The Samaritan woman at the well, whom Jesus asks for a drink, does not understand what he means when he says that he can offer her “living water” (Jn 4:10). Naturally, she thinks that he is referring to material water, but Jesus is speaking of the Holy Spirit whom he will give in abundance through the paschal mystery, bestowing a hope that does not disappoint. Jesus had already spoken of this hope when, in telling of his passion and death, he said that he would “be raised on the third day” (Mt 20:19). Jesus was speaking of the future opened up by the Father's mercy. Hoping with him and because of him means believing that history does not end with our mistakes, our violence and injustice, or the sin that crucifies Love. It means receiving from his open heart the Father's forgiveness.

In these times of trouble, when everything seems fragile and uncertain, it may appear challenging to speak of hope. Yet Lent is precisely the season of hope, when we turn back to God who patiently continues to care for his creation which we have often mistreated (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 32-33; 43-44). Saint Paul urges us to place our hope in reconciliation: “Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20). By receiving forgiveness in the sacrament that lies at the heart of our process of conversion, we in turn can spread forgiveness to others. Having received forgiveness ourselves, we can offer it through our willingness to enter into attentive dialogue with others and to give comfort to those experiencing sorrow and pain. God's forgiveness, offered also through our words and actions, enables us to experience an Easter of fraternity.

In Lent, may we be increasingly concerned with “speaking words of comfort, strength, consolation and encouragement, and not words that demean, sadden, anger or show scorn” (FratelliTutti, 223). In order to give hope to others, it is sometimes enough simply to be kind, to be “willing to set everything else aside in order to show interest, to give the gift of a smile, to speak a word of encouragement, to listen amid general indifference” (ibid., 224).

Through recollection and silent prayer, hope is given to us as inspiration and interior light, illuminating the challenges and choices we face in our mission. Hence the need to pray (cf. Mt 6:6) and, in secret, to encounter the Father of tender love.

To experience Lent in hope entails growing in the realization that, in Jesus Christ, we are witnesses of new

times, in which God is “making all things new” (cf. Rev 21:1-6). It means receiving the hope of Christ, who gave his life on the cross and was raised by God on the third day, and always being “prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls [us] to account for the hope that is in [us]” (1 Pet 3:15).

3. Love, following in the footsteps of Christ, in concern and compassion for all, is the highest expression of our faith and hope.

Love rejoices in seeing others grow. Hence it suffers when others are anguished, lonely, sick, homeless, despised or in need. Love is a leap of the heart; it brings us out of ourselves and creates bonds of sharing and communion.

“Social love' makes it possible to advance towards a civilization of love, to which all of us can feel called. With its impulse to universality, love is capable of building a new world. No mere sentiment, it is the best means of discovering effective paths of development for everyone” (FratelliTutti, 183).

Love is a gift that gives meaning to our lives. It enables us to view those in need as members of our own family, as friends, brothers or sisters. A small amount, if given with love, never ends, but becomes a source of life and happiness. Such was the case with the jar of meal and jug of oil of the widow of Zarephath, who offered a cake of bread to the prophet Elijah (cf. 1 Kings 17:7-16); it was also the case with the loaves blessed, broken and given by Jesus to the disciples to distribute to the crowd (cf. Mk 6:30-44). Such is the case too with our almsgiving, whether small or large, when offered with joy and simplicity.

To experience Lent with love means caring for those who suffer or feel abandoned and fearful because of the Covid-19 pandemic. In these days of deep uncertainty about the future, let us keep in mind the Lord's word to his Servant, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you” (Is 43:1). In our charity, may we speak words of reassurance and help others to realize that God loves them as sons and daughters.

“Only a gaze transformed by charity can enable the dignity of others to be recognized and, as a consequence, the poor to be acknowledged and valued in their dignity, respected in their identity and culture, and thus truly integrated into society” (FratelliTutti, 187).

Dear brothers and sisters, every moment of our lives is a time for believing, hoping and loving. The call to experience Lent as a journey of conversion, prayer and sharing of our goods, helps us as communities and as individuals to revive the faith that comes from the living Christ, the hope inspired by the breath of the Holy Spirit and the love flowing from the merciful heart of the Father.

May Mary, Mother of the Saviour, ever faithful at the foot of the cross and in the heart of the Church, sustain us with her loving presence. May the blessing of the risen Lord accompany all of us on our journey towards the light of Easter.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 11 November 2020, the Memorial of Saint Martin of Tours FRANCISCUS