A Message from the Bishop for Lent 2014

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Pope Francis was elected to the See of Peter a year ago on 13 March, 2013. His inauguration Mass was celebrated in St Peter’s Square six days later, on the feast of St Joseph.

In the intervening twelve months we have witnessed the secular media, as indeed many within the household of faith, making varying efforts to get the measure of Pope Francis. His simple and less formal approach, his more spontaneous gestures and homilies that do not always follow scripted lines, and his constant direction of attention to the needs of the poor are contrasted by some with his equally forthright upholding of Catholic teaching in faith and morals. So, for instance, we have heard Pope Francis declare, unsurprisingly, abortion is “horrific” and “It is absurd to say you follow Jesus Christ, but reject the Church.”

Within these twelve months Pope Francis has pursued the project of the reform of the immediate administration which assists him in fulfilling his ministry, the Roman Curia. In recent weeks we have learned of the great honour the Holy Father has bestowed on the Church in Australia by appointing our own Metropolitan Archbishop as Cardinal Prefect of the new Vatican Secretariat for the Economy.

Cardinal Pell, to whom the Church in Australia owes so much in the renewal of its mission in his 27 years as a bishop in Melbourne and Sydney, will be greatly missed among us as he moves to Rome. Our good wishes and prayers go with him. The Cardinal’s new office as the virtual Treasurer of the Holy See, with a mandate to reform its finances, will be an onerous task. We are proud to endorse the confidence of the Holy Father’s choice.

In this Lent Letter I wish to highlight some of the thoughts which Pope Francis has put before all of us in his own Lenten Message. He takes as his starting for our path of Lenten conversion the words of St Paul, encouraging the Christians of Corinth to be generous in helping the needy faithful in Jerusalem: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (2 Cor 8:9)

So what is the poverty, the Pope asks, by which Christ frees us and enriches us? “It is His way of loving us, His way of being our neighbour, just as the Good Samaritan was the neighbour to the man left half-dead by the side of the road.” (St Luke, 10:25ff).

Those around us today who are “half-dead” and in need of us to make their poverty our own, and to alleviate it, are those whom the Pope points out as living in three types of destitution: material, moral, and spiritual.

Material destitution is what is normally called poverty. “In the poor and outcast we see Christ’s face; by loving and helping the poor, we love and serve Christ. Our efforts are also directed to ending violations of human dignity, discrimination and abuse in the world, for these are so often the cause of destitution. When power, luxury and money become idols, they take priority over the need for a fair distribution of wealth. Our consciences thus need to be converted to justice, equality, simplicity and sharing.”

Moral destitution “consists in slavery to vice and sin.” Pope Francis asks, “How much pain is caused in families because one of their members — often a young person — is in thrall to alcohol, drugs, gambling or pornography? How many people no longer see meaning in life or prospects for the future, how many people have lost hope?”
And spiritual destitution: the Pope reminds us this Lent that "wherever we go we are called as Christians to proclaim the liberating news that forgiveness for sins committed is possible, that God is greater than our sinfulness, that he freely loves us at all times and that we were made for communion and eternal life.

The Lord asks us to be joyous heralds of this message of mercy and hope! It is thrilling to experience the joy of spreading this good news, sharing the treasure entrusted to us, consoling broken hearts and offering hope to our brothers and sisters experiencing darkness. It means following and imitating Jesus, who sought out the poor and sinners as a shepherd lovingly seeks his lost sheep. In union with Jesus, we can courageously open up new paths of evangelization and human promotion."

With a great company of heroic saints from earliest times, through St Francis of Assisi to Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta to inspire us, the Church through its members today still works through hidden works of charity and the public advocacy of social justice to relieve the poverty of material destitution.

As our society seems increasingly in peril of losing its hold of the spiritual and moral foundations formed by the Judaeo-Christian revelation, the evidence of the other forms of destitution, as Pope Francis points out, is painfully all around us. Our dedication by prayer and other means, which have a special place in the penance and self-denial of Lent, will be evidence that we believe that each one of us has a part to play, through God’s grace, in bringing about spiritual conversion and newness of life in our brothers and sisters, often those closest to us.

So let us not lose sight of the underlying joy and hope that comes from this forty-day immersion in the mercy of God. After all, we Christians do not observe Lent as an end in itself, but as a privileged time to get ourselves and the world ready for the annual celebration of the Resurrection of the Saviour: "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2)

I make the final words of Pope Francis my own for our diocese: “In expressing this hope, I likewise pray that each member of the faithful and every church community will undertake a fruitful spiritual journey. I ask all of you to pray for me. May the Lord bless you and Our Lady keep you safe.”

Yours devotedly in Christ,

+ Geoffrey Jarrett

Most Rev. Geoffrey H. Jarrett,
Bishop of Lismore.

Ash Wednesday, 5th March 2014