



Lenten Pastoral Message - 2019

My dear Friends,

I don't know about you, but the Season of Lent that we all have now entered could not have come at a better time. By this, I mean that our Church is struggling. We seem to be lurching from one crisis to another. The news concerning Cardinal George Pell has surprised and shaken us.

Sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults seems to be the dark cloud that just won't go away despite our best efforts. As Bishop of Townsville, let me assure you that our Diocese is doing everything it can locally to keep our parishes and schools safe. Having said that, we certainly have had our fair share of historical sexual abuse. That is on the public record.

I talked about this matter to our young leaders as I commissioned them for service in the Cathedral last weekend. I wanted to assure them that despite these serious setbacks, the Church was still committed to preaching the good news

Indeed, I said to them that we needed their presence in the Church like never before. I went on to emphasise that they are the hope of the side and that Jesus was calling them to be his beautiful face in the world – a face that shines brightly in the darkness.

Yes, our Church needs an illumination that only Jesus Christ can give. We are the Church, of course, and we are all being called to conversion and a change of heart.

The Season of Lent helps us in this regard. We all need to do a little dying so that new life can emerge, for without death a new life cannot come. The boost we need is the death we have to have.

Reflecting on the present situation a priest wrote: "Ash Wednesday I believe, especially this year is when we can say – this is my Church. It has got its sins – it always has had its sins and sinners - but Christ calls me to convert my life to his image and likeness and that call is not for individuals only, it is for the entire community."

So, Lent has by its nature an aspect of penitence about it but that should not make us sad. As Pope Francis has explained in his Lenten Pastoral message: "Each year through Mother Church, God give us this joyful season when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed as we recall the great events that gave us new life in Christ. (Preface of Lent 1)

In other words, we celebrate Lent in light of the Resurrection and not apart from it for the whole history of salvation or Christ's paschal mystery is a dynamic process for all creation.

Paschal mystery refers to the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in this Lenten season, it seems to me that we all know the suffering of the Church and the "death" associated with it.

We all know the suffering in our own lives and the effects of sin. These are our personal "deaths" but as I am seeking to make clear, these "deaths" are necessary. Our personal lives need to experience this, as does the Catholic Church as an institution.

The “deaths” caused by sexual abuse to the victims means that something of the Church culture must die too. Do ministers exercise a “power over” others or should “power” be seen more about being of service to all by sharing the responsibility of building up the Church together?

With these “deaths” will come a sense that new ways must be found. The Lenten season will help us with these “new ways”. However, Lent is not about self-help and self-improvement per se – it is about deepening our knowledge in the suffering and crucified Christ.

Giving up something like chocolate and alcohol is one thing, but this will remain superficial if we don’t “die” to ways that are not of God. It is more about “giving over” not “giving up!”

The Paschal mystery to which we all aspire to embrace fully at Easter needs a radical shake up in our lives today; otherwise, we will never be able to grasp the self-emptying love of Jesus Christ. His love involved passion and dying culminating in victory over suffering and death. Passion and dying did not have the last word in His life and they will not have the last word in our life either.

So, I invite us to enter into this Lenten season with an openness to change. Pray, fast and give to the poor by all means, but don’t stop there. Our Lord expects more of us, and our Lord expects more from His Church as well which means we have to practice what we preach, not just during Lent but at all times.

Blessings to you all,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Timothy J Harris". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. A small cross symbol is written to the left of the first name.

MOST REV TIMOTHY J HARRIS
Bishop of Townsville