

## Pastoral letter for Lent 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Catholic Diocese of Stockholm,

We must not be shaken in our faith in Christ and His Church when we are faced with the horrible fact that consecrated persons have been found guilty of abusing children and covering up their crimes. "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be firm, steadfast" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Now, more than ever we must be steadfast in believing that Jesus Christ will purify and sanctify His Church in this time of trial. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis encourages all the faithful to prayer and penance in this difficult time. This is why the penitential aspect of the Lenten season is emphasized even more this year. The whole Church must put on sackcloth and ashes and take the path of repentance and reconciliation. We pray for the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit, His wisdom and counsel, so that we can prevent abuse more effectively and bring to justice all those who have committed such crimes. Most of all we pray that the gentle breeze and tenderness of the Holy Spirit may heal the wounds of those who have suffered these abuses and offenses.

As the Book of Sirach says "The furnace tests the potter's vessels" (27:5). We, the baptized, are all called to live a life in holiness and continuous purification from all sins. The Holy Spirit wants to inspire us to a more faithful imitation of Jesus Christ, which is put to the test every day of our lives. But with His purifying fire the Holy Spirit wants to free us from the bondage of sin so that we can live in accordance with the Gospel. Jesus wants to heal our blindness which makes us see the splinter in our brother's eye but not even notice the wooden beam in our own. "You hypocrite!" says Jesus "remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother's eye" (Luke 6:42). First and foremost we ourselves must convert and humbly acknowledge our sins and offenses. The Lenten season is the perfect time for repentance, when through an honest confession we can start anew and get pardon for everything that we have broken. God's mercy and forgiveness is what we need more than anything else. When a limb in Christ's mystical body, the Church, converts to a life in holiness, it has an effect on the whole community.

The Church is a holy people on pilgrimage through history and geography. She is on her journey to eternal glory. To its deepest core she is holy and through baptism we all receive its holiness like a tiny seed, a mustard seed, which will grow and transform us from the inside. It is both our obligation to accept this grace and our privilege to be transformed by this gift. This is why it is so tragic and has very serious consequences when evil infiltrates the Church. When a consecrated person abuses an innocent child, it is a blasphemous act which wounds the sacred Heart of Jesus and drags the Church through the mud. When a priest commits such a crime, even in the eyes of an outsider it is more outrageous than if anybody else had done it. They know instinctively that it is much worse when someone who is God's anointed does such a thing and because of that we must all pray for God's mercy and intervention.

"A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit" (Luke 6:43-44). Every person will be judged according to the fruits he bears by his way of life. Through God's grace we can bear good fruit and have a positive influence on others. As baptized we are all called to proclaim all that is good and true to all whom we meet. We must share God's love which is constantly pouring over us. Walking in Jesus' footsteps we must live a life of truth and justice, goodness and mercy. By all means, people must see something of Jesus in the way we live, the way we act, the way we talk. "A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good" (Luke 6:45). During this holy time of Lent we are all invited to be more active in doing good and to pay more attention to the poor, the suffering and the vulnerable. With this year's Lenten collection we intend to help the people in one of the world's poorest and most suffering

countries, South Sudan. By being really generous and open-handed in helping them, we ourselves might also be freed from our greed as well as our selfishness.

Fasting, prayer and almsgiving are the three pillars of Lent. It is a special joy to feel our hearts starting to come alive when we make the effort to abandon our comfort and earthly possessions. There are so many possibilities to let this time of Lent mark a new beginning in our lives, when we decide to follow in Jesus' footsteps and live as his disciples, both as individuals and as a community. We all need to open our hearts to the needy, the lonely, the forgotten, the homeless, the undocumented, yes, there are so many people whose only chance to experience Jesus' love and caring is through us. "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Even if right now the Church is going through a difficult time of trial and purification, we must trust in God's grace that it can lead to a more sanctified and purified Church. Looking back at the history of the Church, quite often the same pattern emerges: a struggle inside or outside the Church can bring forth a deep longing for a holier life, a better imitation of Christ, more openness to the Holy Spirit and keener sense to serving the poor. This is why we must not lose courage but rather surrender ourselves more to the Lord and put our lives into His hands. We also pray for the compassion and protection of the Virgin Mary that she, as Mother of the Church, may help us all along the way of conversion and sanctification. May she help the Church become ever purer and holier.

With my prayer and blessings to you all

Bishop Anders Arborelius OCD

Stockholm, 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2019, on the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter.