

Pastoral letter for Lent 2020

Dear friends, the Lord's beloved and holy in the Catholic Diocese of Stockholm!

It is not a small thing that Jesus expects from us: "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Even Moses heard the same thing: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy" (Exodus 19:2). The central commandment both in the New and Old Testament is that we should be holy and perfect. We may at first find it too much to ask and impossible. It may take time for us to realize that it is very seriously meant, yes, that this calling to holiness is the greatest grace and gift one can imagine. "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). It may take time for us to understand our own dignity and calling that borders on the infinite.

In fact, we need our entire life to embrace this and understand God's great gift of grace to us, which at the same time is a lifelong task that must constantly take more and more hold of us. Through His grace, God wants to turn us into an ever greater resemblance to Christ and give us part of his own holiness. "You belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God" (1 Corinthians 3:23). We are called to reflect Jesus in everything we do and say. People have all the right in the world to expect that those of us who call ourselves Christians can give them an idea of Him through what we are and do. Not least in a secular environment our personal Christian testimony is crucial to helping people meet Jesus and receive His message.

Much of the criticism we hear against us Christians and our Church is that we have not succeeded in conveying something of the holiness of this secret of faith and the perfect love that Jesus has given us. Lent is a time of conversion that wants to help us get closer to God and follow his Son in an even more eager manner. It is therefore important that we take more time for prayer and Bible reading, and that we approach the sacraments of confession and Eucharist with greater zeal and reverence. Then we also get inspiration for carrying out the works of love, which make it clear that we are really serious about our repentance.

In today's gospel Jesus gives us examples of what this means: "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Matthew 5:39). If someone abuses and treats us badly, we have a good opportunity to show what it means to belong to a crucified Lord. That is why we must also be prepared to put up with slander and disrespect. St John of the Cross says something that sounds rather blatant: we must thirst for contempt. When he who is the Lord of the Universe and became man for our sake had to tolerate contempt, we can become more like him if we also get to taste this. At the same time, we must never to give back with the same behavior. Today one often pours contemptuous sensations over one another, not least on social media. Sometimes we have to bear to be badly treated, but as Catholics in Sweden we must never sink so low as to use the same language. "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person", says Jesus (Matthew 5:39).

Something that we as Catholics in Sweden must do more is to show more care for the poor and needy that are close to us. I am very grateful for all the help that we can convey through Caritas to victims of war and disasters in other countries. "Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

(Matthew 5:42). We often think that it is the state and the municipality that will help those who need help here in Sweden, but at the same time we see that so many people are excluded. Both as a church and as individuals, we need to think about how we can better meet what Jesus expects from us. If we live off His holiness and love, it will be natural to think more about those in need than of our own needs. If we have not recognized the face of Jesus in his poor and vulnerable members, he cannot at the same time recognize us as his disciples.

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, then you will be your Heavenly Father's sons" (Matthew 5:44–45). The clearest criterion that we are indeed disciples of Jesus is that we love and pray for enemies and persecutors. We know that Christians are persecuted in many countries. It is our duty as fellow Christians to pray for them and help them, but without hating their persecutors. We must become more engaged for these Christians and others who are persecuted for their faith. At the same time, we must be careful not to be attracted to hate-filled moods. That is why interfaith dialogue is becoming increasingly important in our time. Pope Francis constantly reminds us of this, and calls on us to contribute more actively to a world in which believers of different religions work together for peace and reconciliation and for the creation not to be misused and destroyed.

"God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:17). We must constantly come back to this our calling to holiness. We must not get caught up in what the Pope calls 'the globalization of indifference'. It is so easy to fall in with uncaring and mediocrity. The Lenten invitation to repentance must echo within us and drive us to seek the kingdom of God, to love His commandments, and try to fulfill them in our daily lives. Through prayer we maintain constant contact with the living Lord and are given the power to spread His love in words and deeds. We ask for the help and protection of the Virgin Mary, so that together we can become more faithful to Jesus and His Church and testify with greater zeal about Him in our Swedish society.

With my prayers and blessing,

Stockholm the 25th of January 2020, the Conversion of St Paul

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