

PASTORAL LETTER FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the beginning of last year's Lent, I was in the south of France. The media reported increasingly frantic accounts of the spread of a virus we hadn't, at first, thought would concern us much. Yet Italy was in a state of emergency. Contagion spread relentlessly northward and outward. Who would have thought it would still condition our lives to such an extent a year on?

No one is untouched. Like all of us, I have my own Covid-year story. A friend in England caught the virus in hospital. Already ill with cancer, he lacked physical resistance. He died within a short time. Many monasteries in my order have been badly affected. From friends who are doctors in various countries, I know of real despair. All of us are familiar with more everyday forms of impact: tensions within families surrendered to themselves; financial collapse; loneliness.

After several weeks in lockdown, my eight-year old goddaughter in Italy told her mother: 'Mummy, I no longer recognise myself!' It was wisely said. We need to encounter one another face to face to know who we are.

In an interview in March, the director of a hospital in Paris spoke of 'apocalyptic' conditions. The word struck me. Two days later, I heard it again in a statement from a doctor in the US: 'What is going on is apocalyptic'. Both men were overwhelmed in such a way that they seemed to experience *Apocalypse Now*. But think for a moment about what 'apocalypse' means. It is the name of the last book in the Bible, which we call 'Revelation'. An apocalypse reveals something that has been concealed. Also in this literal sense, the last year has been apocalyptic. What has it revealed? I will point to three insights that may motivate our Lenten discipline.

First, we see how vulnerable our global order is. For the first time in history, the whole world faces the same massive threat at the same time. We condition one another. Yet there are vast gaps between us: we have staggeringly different opportunities. This year of stillness challenges us to think deeply. What sort of society are we minded to create? What do words like 'community' and 'belonging' mean? Who carries responsibility in a maze of vaguely defined structures? Do *we* accept responsibility for the wellbeing of others? Answers to these questions must be sought on the basis of what we believe in. The Gospel shows us the binding significance of suffering and death; but it shows us above all the sense of being alive. In today's

collect we pray: 'Grant that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and, by worthy conduct, pursue their effects'. Amen to that, right in the middle of our vulnerable, wounded world of 2021.

Something else this year has revealed is our need to be close to others. When we hear of people who die on their own, without a hand to hold, or of the elderly confined to isolation; when we confront our own longing for contact, it hurts. There may be healing in this pain. For is it not the case that we have long tended towards superficiality in human relationships? Now that we can *only* meet virtually, we see how vital it is to be together, to gather round a table. For us as Catholics, it is painful not to be permitted to come together as Church, in assembly. I ascertain a growing hunger for the sacraments. It reminds us not to take them for granted. They are, in the strict sense, vehicles of grace: not something we deserve, not something we can lay claim to, but an encounter we yearn for. This entire year has been like a sojourn in the wilderness. Today we read of our Lord's retiring there, where there are wild beasts, but also angels (Mk 1.13). Let us seek him out and remain with him. Let us carry our share of his cross in order to know the power of his resurrection, 'one body, one spirit *in Christ*' (from the Third Eucharistic Prayer).

A third revelation is worth noticing. It concerns the role attributed to the life of the Church in society. It is a very modest role! Let me be clear: we take part as a matter of course in the national effort to contain the virus; we accept, of course, necessary measures and restrictions. But what are we to say about the fact that our ecclesial, sacramental life is reduced, in the eyes of the government, to a hobby? Can it be right that the life of worship is subject to *stricter* norms than the life of trade? These issues call for attention in the time ahead. All of us have something to say in that debate. First, though, let's examine ourselves. If Christian practice has become so marginalised, it says a great deal about us. Is our faith an integrated part of our lives as citizens, or do we consider it private, of no concern to others? How do we respond, in daily life, to the call: 'Repent, and believe in the Gospel'? Does our faith leave visible traces in our lives? What has this year revealed about us as Christians?

In his message for Lent, Pope Francis asks us to let the Gospel's commandments take effect. Look out for others, he tells us; see where help is needed, and provide it. We can all do something creative to carry Christ to others in this way. Our outward deeds must spring from an inward source. We deepen and purify that source by fasting. The Holy Father reminds us that fasting does not just concern food: 'Fasting involves being freed from all that weighs us down—like consumerism or an excess of information, whether true or false'. We enable the

source to be filled when we seek God in prayer and read the Scriptures. If we feed the body less, it is in order that the soul may feast. Don't waste the chance!

In today's Mass, we read about Jesus's solitary combat with the tempter. It is a difficult theme when so many, as it is, are battle-weary. Let me, then, remind you of another theme, every bit as important, which sets the tone for Lent. It is put before us in Psalm 90/91. The Church sings it at Compline. By ancient tradition, it resounds through the Mass of today: in the verses for the introit, gradual, tract, offertory, and communion. If you seek a single Biblical text to serve as food for the Lenten journey, choose this Psalm. Learn it by heart. It speaks with singular force this year. It exhorts us to have trust. When the time is ripe, says the Psalm, the Lord will free us from 'the arrow that flies by day', from 'the plague that prowls in the darkness'. 'His truth', no one else's, 'is buckler and shield'. We have nothing to fear from 'the scourge that lays waste at noon'. When we call upon God, 'no evil shall fall' upon us. If we suffer, for a while, from a sense of being trapped, it is so that we may *know* when the Lord 'will save [us] in distress and give [us] glory'. He will content us 'with length of life' and show us his 'saving power'. As Job says (19.27): '*my* eyes shall behold, and not another'. That affirmation holds for each one of us.

May this year's Lent be a time of revelation, discernment, and grace for us all, that we may 'know the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge, [...] filled with all the fullness of God' (Eph 3.18). That is what it is all about. Let's not forget it.

I pray for you all and I bless you

in pace Cordis Iesu (in the peace of the Heart of Christ)

+fr *Erik Varden* OCSO

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