



February 14, 2024

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Lent is the Church's annual retreat when we are invited to focus on our relationship with Jesus Christ, to center our lives on Him, to deepen our knowledge of Him "in whom we have believed" and to "stir into flame the gift of God" that we have received (*2 Timothy 1, 6-12*). In his message for Lent 2024, Pope Francis recalls that Lent provides the context for renewing our faith and our friendship with Jesus. As our Jewish ancestors in faith journeyed for forty years in the desert from slavery to freedom, "Lent is the season of grace in which the desert can become once more – in the words of the prophet Hosea – the place of our first love (*Hosea 2, 16-17*). God shapes his people; he enables us to leave our slavery behind and experience a Passover from death to life. Like a bridegroom, the Lord draws us once more to himself, whispering words of love to our hearts."

During Lent, the Church calls us to three practices: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. *Prayer* forms the foundation of our relationship with God. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus frequently goes off to a quiet place by Himself to pray. Amidst the noise and busyness of our daily lives, it can be a challenge to imitate the Lord in prayer. As on a retreat, Lent gives us the context to try harder, rising a little earlier or going to sleep a little later, making time to speak to Jesus from our hearts and to listen quietly for His voice in return; to come to know Him more intimately – in whom we have believed.

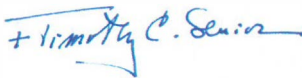
Fasting is very popular these days, especially for those trying to lose weight or to regain a healthy lifestyle. The kind of fasting to which we are called during Lent is more than just physical deprivation. There is a spiritual intentionality that accompanies our fast, intentionally allowing ourselves to fast from those things that sometimes hold us captive in order to be truly free in Christ. Certainly, this includes food and drink, but it also includes attitudes and habits that weigh us down, sins to which we have grown indifferent, selfish actions that exclude others, and frenetic activity that prevents us from spending time with those who need us the most. Like so many aspects of our Catholic life, the outward fasting from food, drink, and other pleasurable activities is but a sign of what ought to be happening inside: growth in self-control, compassion, and selflessness.

Finally, in *almsgiving* we do more than simply give things to those in need, we are called to discern carefully to ensure that our giving genuinely comes from our need and not our excess. Surely it is a good practice to give away extra clothing, household goods, and children's games. Most of us have too much stuff as it is. After that, real almsgiving happens, when we sacrifice something we want to give to a person in true need. In this way, our giving is truly a gift of ourselves to others.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving in these Lenten days can not only help us discover an interior renewal of our friendship with Jesus, centering our lives on Him, but can also stir into flame the gifts we have received to look *outward* -- to live our faith more vibrantly; to be more *visibly* Catholic Christian. When Christians live their faith visibly and are not ashamed of who they are in Jesus Christ, we become God's instruments; instruments of peace and communion, building bridges and drawing people together. Since my first homily as your bishop, Pope Francis' words from his encyclical "Fratelli Tutti" have given us a vision for everyone in our Diocese. He writes the words we can take to heart, "it is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity...Let us dream then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all."

And so, we go together into the desert of Lent and, through prayer, fasting and almsgiving, leave behind whatever enslaves us and open our hearts to renewed freedom in Jesus Christ. Please join me in praying that these Lenten days will be a time of renewal for *everyone* in our Diocese. When Easter comes, may we all experience the joy and hope of the transformative grace of Easter.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Timothy C. Senior". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Timothy C. Senior
Bishop of Harrisburg