

The Lenten Message of His Beatitude Patriarch Bechara Peter Rai

2012

To Their Excellencies, our brothers, the Bishops, and the sons and daughters of our Maronite Church, The Priests, Deacons, the Monks and the Nuns, And all the Faithful,

Greetings and Apostolic Blessing!

The time of Great Lent, which starts on Sunday, February 19, 2012, known as the Entrance into Lent, in which the Church commemorates the sign of transforming the water into wine in Cana of Galilee, is the time of conversion in the imagery of this sign in preparation for the resurrection of hearts in the Pascal Mystery, the Mystery of the Death of Christ in expiation for our sins and His resurrection for our sanctification.¹

So then, it gives me pleasure to address my First Pastoral Letter on the occasion of Great Lent for 2012; and this is what I will continue doing every year, God willing. This would be in addition to the Pastoral Letter that I will address to you, year after year, on March 25, the anniversary of the start of my patriarchal service.

Great Lent – A Time of Conversion

The Son of Man, Jesus Christ, was incarnate to “make all things new”² to renew the image of God in man, which he disfigured by his sins and his evil, and to give him strength, through His Word and His grace that he may triumph over trials, instinct and distorted inclinations. Before we fasted, Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days, living them in austerity and prayer. He taught us how to triumph over the trials of the evil one by repeated reversion to the Word of God, living in profound inner peace.³ This is how He prepared Himself for the launching of His global redemptive and salvific mission, as He declared: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed...” and “sent me.”⁴

The time of Great Lent is a time of conversion in three dimensions: **conversion in the relationship with God** through prayer and repentance for regaining the splendor of divine sonship; **conversion in the relationship with one’s**

self through fasting and mortification for the sake of freeing us from whatever may blemish this sonship and the image of God in us, for the sake of training the will to curb the distorted inclinations and instincts and for exercising self control; and, **conversion in the relationship with every human being**, especially with the needy through acts of love, mercy and almsgiving, so as to restore our all-inclusive fellowship. The consequence of this threefold conversion is entrance into the depths of the mystery of communion and love. Great Lent is contemporaneous with nature’s springtime, which changes into a new attire in preparation for a season of giving. How befitting it is for the human person to be like nature. Thus, it is imperative that we discard this worn out pattern of life by means of mortification and repentance just as nature does in winter, and put on this robe of new life at the level of intellect and vision, acts and conduct.

Behold John the Baptist calling: “Repent, and believe in the Gospel,”⁵ and Paul the Apostle: “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good, pleasing and perfect.”⁶

Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving

The means of this conversion are threefold: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These three are integrated and indivisible and form the Law of Great Lent. We say Law because it is the duty of all, and an Evangelical Law which Christ, the Lord, called for.⁷

Prayer is an existential need. The Holy Spirit, who fills the soul of the prayerful person, liberates that soul from distorted works of the flesh, as Paul the Apostle says, and fructifies it by the fruits of the Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, kindness, purity, humility and patience.⁸ Prayer brings the heart closer to the Holy Spirit who guides our life and frees it from bondage to sin. Saint John Chrysostom affirms: “It is impossible for one who prays to become a slave to sin. For prayer makes what is impossible, possible, and the difficult, easy.” Saint Alphonsus Liguori asserts: “If you pray, you are

¹ Romans 3:25

² Revelation 21:5

³ Refer to Matthew 4:1-11

⁴ Luke 4:18

⁵ Mark 1:15

⁶ Romans 12:2

⁷ Refer to Matthew 6:1, 5, and 16

⁸ Galatians 5:18-23

sure about saving your soul. If you do not pray, you are just as sure of losing your soul.” However, prayer springs forth from faith in God and His love. For, the one who does not believe and does not love, cannot pray, and so, be saved.⁹

Fasting is a necessity for by self-denial of food and drink, each person expiates his/her sins and the evils he/she has done through recompense. For Christ, the Son of God, has expiated the sins and evils of all people through His Passion and Death, and He who is innocent of every personal sin¹⁰ did good to all people.¹¹

However, fasting also encompasses self-denial, from what the Apostle Paul calls: the works of the flesh, which are: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like.¹² Through the words of Isaiah the Prophet, God confirms: “This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke.”¹³

Furthermore, fasting, aside from being an evangelical law, is also an ecclesial counsel; one of the seven counsels: “Fast the Great Lent and the rest of the imposed fasts, and abstain from meat on Friday.”¹⁴ The *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, in paragraph 882, requires: “On the days of penance the Christian faithful are obliged to observe fast or abstinence in the manner established by the Particular Law of their Church *sui iuris*.” Our Maronite Church specifies in the Lebanese Synod that: “Great Lent, known as the Forty, starts on the Monday following the Entrance into Lent and is called Ash Monday, and then connects with the Passion Week for participation in the Redemptive Passion, and ends on the Saturday before Resurrection Sunday. There is no fasting on Sundays and Saturdays, except Holy Saturday, known as the Saturday of the Light, and the feast days that occur during Great Lent, and they are: The Presentation in the Temple, Saint Maron, Saint John Maron, the Forty Martyrs, Saint Joseph, and the Annunciation. Fasting is abstaining from food and drink from midnight till midday; as well as abstention from meat every Friday the year round,

⁹ Refer to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2744 - 2745

¹⁰ Refer to 2 Corinthians 5:21

¹¹ Refer to Acts 10:38

¹² Galatians 5:19-21

¹³ Isaiah 58:6

¹⁴ The Second and Third Counsels

except for those feasts falling on Holy Days of Obligation, the week before the start of Great Lent, the period between Christmas and Epiphany and the period between Resurrection Sunday and Pentecost Sunday.”¹⁵

Almsgiving to the poor, is an expression pertaining to the duty of justice and the commandment of brotherly love: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁶ Jesus the Lord commanded: “So give alms for those things that were within; and see, everything will be clean for you.”¹⁷ And, John the Baptist: “Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none.”¹⁸ And James **the Apostle**: “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”¹⁹ And John the Beloved: “If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him? Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.”²⁰

Almsgiving is the bulk of the works of mercy; through works of charity we help our brothers and sisters, whether in their temporal needs, by feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and the stranger, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and the imprisoned;²¹ or, in their spiritual needs by instructing, educating, advising, consoling and comforting.²²

Through the mouth of Isaiah the Prophet, God once again warns: “This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them... Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...; your vindication shall go before you, and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer.”²³

¹⁵ The Lebanese Synod: Chapter Four, On Feasts and Fasting; #1-3

¹⁶ Matthew 22:39

¹⁷ Luke 11:41

¹⁸ Luke 3:11

¹⁹ James 2:15-17

²⁰ 1 John 3:17-18

²¹ Matthew 25:31-46

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2447

²³ Isaiah 58:6-9

Christ the Redeemer is the One Who Brings About Conversion

By saying that the time of Great Lent is a time of conversion, we mean that it is a time of interior penance and a return to God, self, and others. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the expressive forms of this interior penance, and simultaneously, the means for receiving forgiveness of sins. For all these aims, parishes, monasteries and schools organize spiritual exercises, penitential liturgies, evangelical gatherings and pilgrimages, which the faithful ought to participate in and live out as consecrated time pleasing to God.²⁴

All these are channels of conversion, of penance, which means in its Greek utterance of “meta-noia,” a radical change in one’s self for the sake of its reform and the reform of its relationship with God, self and people. However, it is Christ Jesus who brings about conversion through His Word, grace, and the power of His Holy Spirit, and attains, through repentance, its goals and fruits.

All the Gospels of the Sundays of Lent present us with examples of conversion realized by Christ in a torrent of His love and mercy toward the human person and as a physician for souls and bodies:

- ◆ **The Gospel of the Entrance into Lent** refers to the sign of transforming water into excellent quality wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee,²⁵ to manifest His ability to convert the old inner person into a new creation. Through this transformation, He sows happiness and joy in the heart, as He did with the crowd and the newlyweds at the wedding feast in Cana, which means that Christ is personally the perpetual and constant joy of the human person.
- ◆ **The Gospel of the Healing of the Leper**²⁶ gives conversion the form of healing the leper from his skin sores. With a word, Jesus acceded to his request: “I do will it. Be made clean. The leprosy left him immediately.” This is how conversion takes place in the soul of the penitent, removing all the disfigurements of sin.

◆ **The Gospel of the Healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman**²⁷ reveals another facet of conversion, which is the stopping of the hemorrhage of blood after all attempts by doctors in the course of twelve years ended up in failure. This symbolizes the cessation of the hemorrhage of spiritual, humane and moral values in the human person caused by sin.

◆ **The Gospel of the Prodigal Son**,²⁸ half way through the lenten period and in parable form, touches on the negative change brought about by the sin of the younger son, which transported him from the filial, dignified and abundant state to the state of estrangement, poverty and social degradation. The positive conversion, brought about by his repentance, liberated him from bondage to sin, transported him to the state of fundamental reformation through reconciliation initiated by the father, saved him from death and gave him direction after his alienation, sowing joy at home after mourning and misery at his loss.

◆ **The Gospel of the Healing of the Paralytic**²⁹ gives conversion two facets: Giving life back to a paralyzed man, who stood up and walked, and giving life back to the intellect, will, heart and the conscience all paralyzed by sin. Thus, the paralytic who was healed pursued the path of truth, of the good, and of love and the calling of God.

◆ **The Gospel of the Healing of the Blind Man**³⁰ describes conversion in the giving of sight to the blind man’s otherwise extinguished eyes, and perception to the human soul blinded by sin, which caused a straying from Christ’s light, in His person, His teaching, His signs and His deeds, living in the deep darkness of evil.

◆ **The Gospel of Hosanna Sunday**,³¹ which is the last Sunday of Lent, makes conversion an arrival after a sea of waves and a journey in the sails of the Church, which has lasted six weeks, to the Harbor of Peace and Salvation, to Christ who enters hearts, human society and the earthly city with His peace,

²⁷Luke 8:40-56

²⁸ Luke 15:11-32

²⁹ Mark 2:1-12

³⁰ Mark 10:46-52

³¹ John 12:12-22

²⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1434-1435

²⁵ John 2:10-11

²⁶ Mark 1:35-45

security and stability. With Christ, we walk through Holy Week and participate in His redemptive and salvific Passion, attaining to the dawn of His Resurrection, where conversion is a movement from the state of sin to the state of grace and new life. Thus, conversion would be the resurrection of the heart.

Appeal: Great Lent is the Season of Social Charity

We salute and encourage all initiatives expressive of social charity undertaken by school and university students and their administration, on behalf of orphanages, homes for the elderly and centers for the challenged and those pertaining to difficult cases, in conformity with the evangelical charity and mercy emanating from the Heart of God, "abounding in kindness." We also express our thanks to the commercial and industrial institutions and all people of goodwill who, on the occasion of Great Lent, as well as other occasions, are generous toward poor and needy families, whether by direct means or through the ecclesial and civil benevolent and social organizations. We appreciate, on this occasion, the financial assistance extended by the eparchies and the monastic orders, especially those directed at Catholic schools and universities and the hospitals, thus, reducing the burden on parents and students. We commend all benefactors who undertake development projects in the regions on the industrial, agricultural and investment levels, as they provide encouraging job opportunities and economic activity.

In view of the deteriorating economic and social conditions and the state of poverty which is expanding, we direct our call to all in the Church, to society and to the government so that they may commit themselves to social charity according to the social teaching of the Church, which is based on two principles: First: "God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples;" Second: private property has a social quality which is based on the law of the common destination of earthly goods." We recognize from this teaching, to which is added the principle of solidarity and interconnection between people, the obligation of social charity based on the sharing of the material, cultural, developmental and moral riches of the earth.

The Church for her part is called upon to utilize her goods, which are in the form of endowments, meaning they are reserved for the service of the mission and aiding the poor, for these two equivalent aims. The poor and the needy are altogether the share of the Church anyway; rather, her treasures, because, in them, identified, is the face of Christ.

Also, the political authority is called upon to utilize the State's capabilities, its possessions, public funds, facilities,

ports, taxes, fees and the national economy for the sake of the common good, so that citizens may live in abundance, a dignified life. One of the first duties of the political authority, the state, is to care for poor and needy citizens so that they may have a sense of belonging to their nation and have pride in that.

The Venerable Pope Pius XII taught that "Whoever owns, does so for the sake of all. This is an obliging Christian truth." Blessed Pope John Paul II, after him, taught that "Denying this truth and not committing to the help of the poor, these two are imitations of the Rich Man who ignored wretched Lazarus lying at the gate of his house." Saint John Chrysostom warns resolutely: "Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth, but theirs." Thus, we are all called to participate in the monetary and material contributions, each according to his ability, to help our brothers and sisters, the poor and needy, by virtue of the command of the Church: Give what is due, that is, the tenth, which is aid motivated by love, through the gate of justice, because we are returning to them what is originally their right. This is our evangelical culture and the teaching of our Church.

The Year of the Holy Bible

The Church in Lebanon has declared 2012 as the Year of the Holy Bible pursuant to the recommendation of the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops, which convened in Rome during October of 2010. We are awaiting the promulgation of the Apostolic Exhortation subsequent to this Synod.

Along with Their Excellencies, the Bishops, the Superiors General and the Mothers Superior, we wish to initiate the Year of the Holy Bible, especially in Lenten retreats, whether they take place in the parishes, monasteries or schools. We invite the faithful to participate in them, because "Your Word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path." The need of our souls for the Word is as the need of our bodies for bread. In accordance with the utterance of the Lord Jesus: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the "mouth of God." How beautiful it would be if we make the season of fasting from food a season of reclining at the table of the Lord's Word for the sake of nourishing the soul, intellect and heart and its embodiment in good deeds, initiatives and stands! O, how we wish that every believer would read a text from the Gospels and the Books of the New Testament every day!

It is worthy of preachers and spiritual directors to extract their homilies, reflections and talks from the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church), which was

promulgated by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI on the 30th of September, 2010, subsequent to the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which convened in Rome from the 5th to the 26th of October, 2010, under the title: The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church. His Holiness says that it is the duty of Christian people to come to know the Word of God and its effect in life and in the mission, that they may "confront the new challenges which the present time sets before Christian believers," and live a spiritual renewal emanating from delving into "the Word of the Lord which remains forever."

Let all Servants of the Word strive to attain the goals which this Apostolic Exhortation decrees; and they are:

- ◆ Discovering the Word of God as a spring of perpetual renewal in the life of believers and that of the Church, and so, "in our personal relationship with the sacred Scriptures, their interpretation in the liturgy and catechesis, and in scientific research, the Bible may not be simply a word from the past, but a living and timely word." This discovery and renewal presuppose listening and meditating, as well as the return of the heart, for the sake of retaining God's Word and also openness to the perpetual Pentecost based on love for the Holy Scriptures;
- ◆ Striving ever more to place the Word of God at the heart of every ecclesial activity through appropriate Biblical enculturation at all levels and invigorating apostolic endeavors with the Biblical spirit;
- ◆ Aiding "all the faithful to renew their personal and communal encounter with Christ, the Word of life made visible, and to become His heralds, so that the gift of divine life - communion - can spread ever more fully throughout the world. Indeed, sharing in the life of God, a Trinity of love, is complete joy...to encounter the God who speaks to us and shares His love so that we might have life in abundance;"
- ◆ "Embarking on the New Evangelization," based on the indisputable efficacy of the Word of God, "especially in those nations where the Gospel has been forgotten or meets with indifference as a result of widespread secularism;" and,
- ◆ "Emphasizing the centrality of biblical studies within ecumenical dialogue aimed at the full expression of the unity of all believers in Christ. All of this can only strengthen our conviction that by listening and meditating together on the Scriptures, we experience a real, albeit not yet full, communion."

Conclusion: Echo of His Holiness the Pope

In conclusion, we call for what His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI called for in his message for Great Lent 2012, dated November 3, 2011.

Beginning with the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Let us be concerned for each other, to stir a response in love and good works." His Holiness calls for three things:

1. Pay attention to the other and take care of him/her, thus, "solidarity, justice, mercy and compassion will naturally well up in our hearts. Concern for others entails desiring what is good for them from every point of view: physical, moral and spiritual," as in the parable of the Good Samaritan;
2. Reciprocity amongst us in the spirit of communion and love abiding by the directions of the Apostle Paul: "just as I try to please everyone in every way, not seeking my own benefit but that of the many, that they may be saved," ... "let each of us please our neighbor for the good, for building up." "Let us then pursue what leads to peace and to building up one another;"
3. Walking toward holiness by living a life of love and accomplishing good deeds, this is an all-encompassing Christian call to holiness. Caring for the other and reciprocity in performing good deeds, both aim at encouraging one another toward active ever increasing love, because "the path of the just is like shining light, that grows in brilliance till perfect day."

We raise our prayers to God in the time of Lent, which is the acceptable time, with the intercession of our mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and our father, Saint Maron, imploring the grace to make of Lent an opportunity of inner conversion as we turn a yellowish page in our lives, and start a walk of comprehensive renewal in our personal relationship with God, self and every human person. So, may daily prayer emanating from the Holy Bible elevate us to the universe of God that we may obtain from Him the values of the Spirit, and may Lent free us from the bonds of the flesh, and let charity open up our hearts to the love that grows as the light of dawn grows in brilliance until perfect day. And, may the hymn of glory and praise, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rise from every mouth, now and forever. Amen.

From our See in *Bkerke*, February 9, 2012, the Feast of our Father, Saint Maron

+Bechara Peter Rai
Patriarch of Antioch and all the East □