

Pastoral Letter for Lent 2024

Dear sisters and brothers of the Catholic diocese of Stockholm,

"Unclean! Unclean!", a leper would cry out according to the first reading today from Leviticus (cf. 13:45). All of us are afflicted by the leprosy of sin and in desperate need of cleansing and salvation. At the same time, we often find it difficult to see our own personal need for Jesus' saving and cleansing love. Through the influence of original sin, as Jesus himself has indicated, it is easier for us to see the uncleanness of others. The speck in the other's eye is always easier to see than the beam in one's own eye (cf. Mt 7:3). Lent is God's generous offer to each of us to annually discover our own beam, our own sin, our own boundless need to be cleansed and saved by God's grace. Year after year, the Church gives us this wonderful opportunity to be renewed, so that we can receive the new life and grace of Easter that can transform us. Recognizing our need for this is one of the greatest tokens of grace that God can give us. To be horrified by the sins of the world and others will not take us any further. The humble self-awareness of one's own weakness and the participation in the world's turning away from God is something we share with the saints. When a saint like Teresa of Avila can honestly say of herself that she is the world's greatest sinner, we think that sounds exaggerated. Yet, we could all use a greater consciousness of sin, so that we see our own need for God's forgiveness and grace in order to truly open ourselves up to what God wants to do with us. We must all long for the beatitude we encounter in the Psalms to be granted to us: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven" (Psalm 32:1). Through the sacrament of reconciliation, this becomes a reality.

God causes His sun to rise upon the evil and the good. God loves every human being whom He has created in His image. No matter how seemingly corrupt and trapped in sin a person may be, God wants to cleanse and save him. We therefore speak of God's universal will to save. By sending his only begotten Son to us and allowing Him to sacrifice Himself on the cross for our salvation while we were still sinners, the Father's boundless love for us has been made manifest. He lets His goodness and blessing rest upon us all, constantly pour down over us, no matter who we are and what we have done.

It is this treasure of saving, purifying love that the Church is allowed to administer and distribute. Just as Jesus has come for the sinners and their repentance, the Church, his mystical body, is the instrument he uses to bring his grace and blessing upon us sinners and our wounded world. No one of us can deserve all this. It's just grace. "All is grace," says Thérèse of the Child Jesus. In the past, people used to speak of "distress for sin" to point to our boundless need for grace. Distress can become grace.

"By grace make us such that you may dwell in us," we prayed in today's Collect. We have to look at our whole life as a process of transformation. With infinite patience, God gives us His grace and blessing to make us more and more worthy to be His dwelling place. Through baptism he has taken this out in advance, because then we already became a holy temple of the Spirit where the triune God dwells in all his reality. That is one of the great paradoxes of faith. God has so much trust and love for us that from the very beginning he gives us this dignity that surpasses anything we can imagine in our wildest imagination: that we may be a holy dwelling place, a temple where God himself dwells.

Time and again, the Church, as the tender and good Mother that she is, reminds us of our call to holiness. Like the leper in the Gospel, we can all kneel down and pray, "If you are willing, you can make me clean" (Mark 1:40). Through our faith, we know that it is Jesus' greatest desire to make us pure and holy. It's just a matter of receiving His grace, follow His commandments, and allow Him to transform us. It sounds easy, but it can cost us blood, sweat, and tears. Sin does not easily loosen its grip on us. The whole pastoral and maternal care of the Church for us is to communicate to us the grace and blessing of God, so that we can give free rein to the Holy Spirit within us. It's always a deeply personal process. We can never convert others, no matter how much we would like to. But with God's grace, we can actually repent ourselves, step by step. More and more, sanctifying grace can penetrate into our dark recesses and corners, banishing the mist of sin, the ingrained dirt of selfishness, breaking the tyranny of self-love. More and more we can open ourselves to the light, the light of the new life and Easter. More and more, the darkness of sin can be dispelled, and evil can be banished. Jesus constantly encourages us: "I am willing! Be clean!" (Mark 1:41).

During our arduous pilgrimage on the path of sanctification, we constantly need the grace of God, the blessing and maternal help of the Church, and the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the saints. We must again and again take refuge in Mary, whom we revere as "the refuge of sinners." She is the only one always pure and undefiled, fully untouched by sin. In her, we get a glimpse of what it means to be completely free from sin. She wants to help us and inspire us to receive God's grace and allow us to be set free from our sin. As the mother of the Church, she wants all the members of the Church to walk the road of sanctification. We know from painful experience that all the members of the Church, except she, are sinners. We suffer because our personal sin obscures the beauty of the Church and its ability to convey the message of salvation to our world torn by violence and war.

Therefore, we ask for the intercession and support of the Virgin Mary, so that through a holy life in imitation of Jesus, we can help people to open themselves to his grace. Each time we receive the blessing, we can renew our commitment to the triune God who wants to give us some of his holiness. Therefore, I pray for you and give you all my blessing to help you to leave behind all sin, and in joy and gratitude follow Jesus, love Jesus, and praise Jesus everywhere and always.

Stockholm on the 2nd of February 2024

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