

Pastoral Letter for Lent 2023

Dear brothers and sisters! "Repent and believe in the gospel" (cf. Mark 1:15). We are invited to consider Jesus' exhortation time and again during Lent. We can always turn ever closer to him. We can never say that we are completely converted. Faith can always grow and shape our way of life even more. The light of the gospel can always shine on us and on our blind spots. Conversion is a continual process that should never stop, either in my personal life or in the life of the church community. Lent is God's annual gift to us, when we can take conversion more seriously.

We need to rediscover Jesus and his message. We must realize that he wants to come even closer to us and unite us even more with himself. Our prayer, our personal loving relationship with him, can always be deepened. He as a person and his message can light up our whole existence. Our way of thinking and acting can be transformed. "Let us so meditate on your words and your wonderful deeds, that what we do and say may always please you" (Collect prayer). A good indicator that we take our conversion seriously is the desire to please Jesus and make him happy. If our love is genuine, then the Other, whether it is God or our neighbour, is more important than myself. We only find true joy when we can go beyond ourselves, wanting to please the Other.

We want to convert not just to become better persons but above all to honour and please God. "I do not wish to devote the slightest moment to anything other than God's glory," says Saint Birgitta. The more we shift our focus onto God, the more we are transformed. True holiness is an undeserved grace and it is a participation in God's own holiness. Through our baptism, we have already received this grace as a small seed that will transform us. This always happens in the community of the baptized, in the Church, but it must benefit the others, yes, all of suffering humanity.

"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). Paul's question to the saints in Corinth is just as relevant today for the saints in Stockholm. God's grace works within us in order to make us more and more transparent to his holiness. We need to convert to our own dignity and our own calling to holiness. "God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:17). One of the most important messages of the Second Vatican Council is to remind all the baptized of their call to holiness. We can only survive as believing Christians in a non-believing environment if we affirm this call. So many drift away from Jesus and his Church, because they never discovered their calling to be God's holy temple, illuminating the world with the light of Jesus. In order to strengthen unity within our diocese and with the Pope and to counteract all division, this calling is necessary in our polarized times.

In the old covenant, one knew that only the saints could maintain faithfulness to the covenant. "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). God's faithful love for his people permeates both the Old and the New Testaments. It

is a love that requires constant conversion to the God who is love, an eternal communion in love between the Father and the Son in the unity of the Spirit. It is this God who loves us with infinite love, but who also expects us to respond in kind and to serve him and our neighbour with all our hearts.

It is only through our indissoluble union with Jesus that we are able to respond to God's love and can love our neighbour, whoever he or she is, with Jesus' own love. The Holy Spirit is infused in us through our baptism and our confirmation, inspiring us constantly to live in love and be transformed by love, thus being able to transform the world around us. Jesus dies on the cross to give us proof of his love. It is this perfect sacrifice of love that comes to life for us in the Eucharist. There we receive constant nourishment for our conversion, so that we can please God by serving and honouring Him and our neighbour. Then we try to live each day in the service of love. Everything that happens and everyone we meet can help us fulfil our calling to love God and our neighbour.

"Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). It amazes us when we hear Jesus say this to us. We realize that it is completely beyond our capability. We are and will always remain weak, fragile, sinful. At the same time, we have received God's holiness and perfect love. It drives us from within with irresistible force to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. We come to share in the Son's constant loving relationship with the Father. Through the power of the Spirit, together as a Church we bear witness to this perfect love. In all humility we should rejoice at this and move forward on the path of conversion. Sometimes it is outsiders and seemingly non-believers who actually sense this and remind us of this. They rightly expect holiness and perfect love from us. They are disappointed when we Christians do not live up to our own ideal. When they hear about priests who commit terrible abuses, they are deeply hurt and scandalized. In this way, they can actually help us to convert and make us more aware of our call to holiness.

Only God is holy. Only God's love is perfect. With his grace, he constantly gives us a share of this priceless reality. We have to administer this treasure as a "loan from God" which transforms us and enables us to transform our surroundings. There is always someone waiting for us and wanting to find a share in God's love, hope in hopelessness, joy in sorrow and help in need. During this holy season of Lent, all of us in our diocese have to take our conversion more seriously. We must strengthen our unity with Jesus and with one another, so that our Church in Sweden may be more evangelizing. We can all become more credible witnesses and help other people to understand that they too are infinitely loved and can become a temple of God where God's spirit dwells and acts within them.

With my prayers and blessing for you all, +Anders Arborelius ocd