

Pastoral Letter 2021



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We're almost a full year into the Pandemic now. What has it meant for you? I'm addressing that question to everybody who reads this in the full knowledge that the answer will be utterly unique in every case. For one person this time will have brought the greatest personal tragedies of a lifetime as a result of sickness and loss of lives. For another it will have meant serious limitations and loss, frustrations and disappointments. For others still it will appear as a time of challenge, refocus and even renewal of commitment in life.

So, I ask you again; how has it really been for you? Is there something of all of the above going on for you? Challenge along with tragedy; refocus coming from frustration?

The most glorious and significant thing about your life is that it is a walk with God. God is the centre of all things. To know God and to love and serve Him in the bits and pieces of your life, is always a possibility no matter how your life seems to be at any moment. You might doubt God; God doesn't doubt you. Perhaps you feel totally unworthy of God's love and concern; it may make no sense to you but God is desperately keen to be in relationship with you.

Opening our hearts to God, worship of God is the most worthwhile and important thing that human beings can do. This pandemic experience may have made that very difficult for you. On the other hand it may have opened your heart up to see it afresh.

It has been said by some persons in public service that 'religion is non-essential', that gathering for Mass and other religious services is less important than shopping or physical exercise or many other things. I know that some of you feel that, by cooperating as fully as we are with the government, we are acquiescing in the falsehood that God and his service and our public witness to him are not essential. Parish communities all over Ireland took the utmost care to make sure that our churches are as safe as possible, and I am grateful for the dedication of clergy and countless numbers of volunteers who made this happen. I want you to know that I long for our churches to be open for Mass and the sacraments as soon as possible. We need to let our political leaders know that God and our worship of Him are central to us; they are utterly essential. Pope Francis pointed out recently that; 'the right to worship must be respected, protected and defended by civil authorities like the right to bodily and physical health'.

And now Lent is upon us; and Lent is not a dreary burden but a marvellous annual, God-given opportunity for a personal and communal shakeup. I invite you wherever you are at – even in the midst of tragedy – to see Lent as a gentle and generous invitation from God to open your heart to new beginnings, to a new and deeper walk with God in your life.

But, Lent has to be about a personal choice. I invite you to ask yourself: Am I slipping away from a sense of God? Does this long break from the public practice of the faith mean that I or those close to me are getting out of the habit? Will it simply seem not so important going forward? Could you be saying to yourself: “We got by without it for months on end ...maybe it’s not that important,”?

Use this time of Lent to take stock. Where am I on my journey with God? What is God saying to me at this moment? Be certain that he is calling you to turn towards him and come close. He is saying: ‘Come back to me with all your heart,’ or simply, “Come to me you who labour and are heavy burdened and I will give you rest.”

So, what do we do? We pray. If you don’t pray much put some new act of prayer into your day, every day. Do it, whether you feel like it or not. If it is the case that you say an awful lot of prayers already, then what you need to do is to be quiet; spend some time each day in silence and let God speak to your heart. In fact, all of us need to put at least some minutes of quiet into our day when we let God show us what is really going on. You could make a practice of joining something online. One of my most profound experiences over this pandemic has been leading *An Tobar Domhain* at 9.15pm from our Cathedral on the Cathedral webcam (www.churchservices.tv/letterkenny) and Raphoe Diocese FaceBook page. To know that I was joined by the People of God from across the Diocese helped me to stay connected with God and his people. You will be most welcome to join me and the Cathedral team each evening at 9.15pm during Lent for this time of Rosary and quiet reflection on our lives.

The second thing is make a sacrifice. Discipline yourself in relation to something you like as a sacrifice. You know-what it should be. The-most important reason for our taking on prayer and fasting this Lent is not about any agenda of our own however important it is. The overarching good reason for praying more intensely during Lent and for backing the prayer up with a genuine sacrifice or fast is to beg God to live in our hearts. Eastern Christian theology says that what happens through the life of prayer, the sacraments and Christian living is that we become like God. God takes us where we are at, however weak and sinful we feel ourselves to be, he will slowly but surely over time make us more like Himself.

That is the purpose of human life, of every Christian life; to become like God. Lent is a special time for committing to that process. It is not our work; it is all God’s work but it cannot happen without our cooperation. Lent, our time of prayer and sacrifice, is that cooperation.

So many of us are longing for the day – let it be soon – when we can gather together to celebrate God’s love especially in the Holy Mass. However, no matter what happens or when it happens, Lent is a great gift NOW. Let us turn to God with all our hearts.