

Bishop's pastoral letter for Lent
Repent and believe in the Gospel! (Mark 1:15)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

These words from the Bible tell us Lent is coming and remind us to see life as a pilgrimage. We are seekers in mind and spirit. This journey that begins in the heart leads us to search for God's will in our lives.

A pilgrim is not a tourist. The goal of a pilgrimage far exceeds what any place that we can arrange to visit can offer. Rather, it is the experience of getting closer to Christ—to dwell in God—so we can carry out the mission that God has entrusted to us.

Recently, during the Christmas season, we celebrated the joy of *God being with us*. During the 40 days of Lent, we have to take a step further and learn how to walk with Jesus who is God Incarnate.

Our journey of conversion begins this Lent with Ash Wednesday on March 1. The entire Church will rekindle its effort in prayer, fasting, abstinence, sacrifice and works of mercy—to prepare to celebrate the Pascal Mystery of Jesus Christ.

In order to complement the diocese's pastoral orientation *Care of Marriage, Family and Life*, this year the preparatory committee for Lent proposes the theme *Upholding marriage and family values with the love of God*. It also promotes various activities regarding spirituality and charity.

The Gospel on the First Sunday of Lent points out, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). For this reason, learning to walk with Christ begins with listening to the Word of God.

Like the Magi who followed the star to find the holy infant who was born in a manger; or as King Herod bade the priests and scribes to look through the Hebrew scriptures to ascertain the birthplace of the new ruler, in the same way, if we observe closely and open ourselves humbly, we will discover that God has been sending us messages and enlightenment through the people and events around us.

Reading the Bible will surely provide us with nourishment for our spiritual life and acts of charity.

Lent and the bountiful liturgies of Holy Week are intended to prepare catechumens to receive the sacraments of initiation during the Easter Vigil. They will become sons and daughters of God, and members of the Church.

When the entire Church walks with the catechumens on this journey of faith, the faithful will come to experience the presence of Christ in the liturgies and in the sacraments.

Let Christ lead each of us to walk steadfastly on the path of life and overcome all kinds of limitations and trials in order to arrive safely at our eternal home in Heaven. The conversion of our hearts also prompts us to pay attention to those around us. If we are familiar with the Word of God, we will have the strength to respond to others' needs and become a Christian who walks with others.

Besides defending the values of marriage, family and life, the Church should also follow the exhortation of Pope Francis who says, "The Church's task is often like that of a field hospital" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 291).

The Church must also walk with the weak and wounded among God's children, restoring their faith and hope. I call on all parishes, schools and diocesan organisations, especially those agencies that offer social services and counselling, to study *Amoris Laetitia*, the exhortation by Pope Francis, carefully and follow its pastoral suggestions, accompanying each couple, each family, as well as each wounded individual in facing their problems. We should help them through their crises and help them to find ways to resolve difficulties.

In the recent Jubilee of Mercy, we have experienced the merciful face of God the Father who helps us find the strength for renewal and for moving ahead. We understand that, only by relying on the mercy of God and cooperating with God's grace, can we continue to grow and make progress in faith.

May every member of our diocese extend the spirit of mercy and reach out to whomever is in need in society, to assist the weak and the poor and be generous in supporting various fund-raising activities during Lent, to minister to those who are hungry and thirsty.

I wish to remind everyone that to be merciful does not mean tolerating unjust behaviour and conditions. On the contrary, the mercy of God the Father impels us to take on the role of a prophet, condemning clearly the factors that harm life, marriage and family.

Only a more wholesome and equitable social environment can ensure the common good and happiness of the people. Recent studies show that in Hong Kong long work hours and exorbitant property prices are rampant. They upset normal family life. We

pray that all sectors can work together to develop social institutions that are good for the family.

The family is where every person gets rest and nourishment, and where life grows healthily. May the Word of God be at the centre of each family, accompanying the members in their life's journey, as they work hard to foster communion and mutual reliance at home. Where warmth and love exist in the family, everyone will long to come home.

Life's journey points to our eternal home in Heaven. That is truly where we reside in eternity. May we encourage each other, follow the footsteps of Christ and live out—beginning with marriage and the family—our care for each other, and communion with one another.

Let us be a messenger of love, respond actively to God's call and take part in the holy task of building up the Kingdom of Heaven.

May God grant you and your family grace and peace!

**+ John Cardinal Tong
Bishop of Hong Kong
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Feast of Saint Cyril and Methodius**