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**Pastoral Letter for the Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
18/19 February 2023**

On Wednesday, Lent begins. I write today to give you every possible encouragement to use these weeks of Lent to refresh and deepen your faith. As we have just heard from the Book of Leviticus: 'Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.' (Leviticus 19:2). This is a heartfelt plea. While there are so many challenges facing us all at this time, our faith underpins everything we do. The gift of faith gives our lives an enduring purpose and stability. A faith that is refreshed and deepened helps us to be gracious, steadfast and even robust in every circumstance.

I put before you today three ways of refreshing and renewing your faith. They are these: a renewed focus on Jesus; a fresh readiness to bear witness to him; and, thirdly, a conscious effort to build community and compassion wherever you may be.

Let me speak about each one.

First, during these weeks of Lent please do all you can to place Jesus at the heart of your lives. Our relationship with him is the foundation of all we strive for, our abiding strength and our source of hope and joy. Without this relationship our faith loses its heart and warmth, becoming a matter of outward observance rather than inner wonder.

There can be no friendship with our Blessed Lord unless we give him space in our hearts. We need a time of prayer every day when we can simply talk to him, bringing him our worries and our joys.

When and where you pray doesn't matter; just whatever suits you. Pray in a style that appeals to you, whatever that may be. But, please, do it! And encourage each other to do so, whether in family prayer or with friends, in each other's company or even over Zoom. Jesus is there, waiting to embrace you, to rejoice in your achievements, to comfort you in your trials. Please give him space in your day, every day. After all, St Paul reminds us: 'You belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.' (1 Corinthians 3:23).

Now the second aspect of the renewal I hope you can find is this: please let this faith, this relationship with the Lord, express itself when you are with other people.

I am certainly not asking you to find a soapbox or in any way to force your faith onto others. No. But there are many moments when speaking of the goodness of the Lord is quite appropriate. For example, when someone is sharing with you their sorrow or distress, please don't hesitate to tell them you will pray for them. Or when you come across a person who is feeling alone or neglected, please do speak to them of the love of the Lord and the consolation you find in his presence.

In the recent Synodal discussions, many people expressed concern for those who feel excluded from the Church, often because of their understanding of Church teaching. We must remember that the teachings of the Church flow from words spoken by our Blessed Lord to those striving to be close to him. Yes, they are sometimes very demanding. But they are teachings which he gives us in love, invitations which are life-giving. When we hear his voice speaking to our inmost heart, we can grasp the real meaning of those teachings. When we attend to his voice, we can hear it resonating in the voice of the Church. Only with this attentiveness to him can we truly explain to others the beauty of his teaching.

When we fix our eyes on the Lord, feelings of exclusion can be overcome. We can appreciate more deeply that we are, each of us, made in the image and likeness of God. He has an embrace for everyone. He excludes no one. He offers an invitation to each person to come and follow him. As we respond to that invitation, we become aware of a need for a change of heart and behaviour, in one area of life or another, even though each of us makes progress in his way only gradually, step by small step.

The third thing I ask of you this Lent is to refresh in your lives the way you put faith into action.

Here I want to highlight just one thing: in every circumstance, whether at home or school, at work or leisure, strive to be ‘a bond of connection between persons’ (St John Henry Newman). Building for others a sense of being accepted is a genuine first expression of the life that Jesus offers. When we recognise and respect the goodness in every person we meet and strive, however simply, to reach out to them, we put faith into practice. Can we echo in our actions just a little of that truth in today’s Psalm that ‘The Lord is compassion and love’? Building community, breaking down hostilities is doing the work of our Blessed Lord. It is a work so much needed in our troubled world. Every day will bring opportunities to do this. I hope that in the days of this Lent, each of us will make an extra effort to put our faith in the Lord into practice in this special way. This is the appeal of today’s Gospel message: a generous love that overcomes hostility!

One of my favourite saints is St Francis of Assisi. There is a lovely story, or maybe a legend, about him that I want to tell. It is said that towards the end of his life, when he was near to death, he gathered his followers together. Looking round he said to them: ‘Brethren, let us begin to love the Lord because so far we have made little progress!’ Well, if such a great saint can say those words, so can each of us.

My appeal to you, then, is very simple. This Lent, try to make a little more progress in prayer, in speaking of Our Blessed Lord to others, and in being a bearer to others of his compassion and love.

And please pray for me, as I will most certainly pray for you.

Yours devotedly,

+ Vincent Nichols

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster