

Dear Friends in Christ,

From the time that we were very young, perhaps too young to fully understand the words, we have known that Lent is a penitential season. Throughout these forty days of preparation for Easter, the Church calls us to a sober re-examination of our lives and our relationship with Christ. It is a time to ask: Is Christ really at the center of my life?

For many of us, this process of reflection brings us naturally to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote recently in the pastoral exhortation “God’s Gift of Forgiveness,” “In the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, also called confession, we meet the Lord, who wants to grant forgiveness and the grace to live a renewed life in him. In this sacrament, he prepares us to receive him free from serious sin, with a lively faith, earnest hope, and sacrificial love in the Eucharist.”

The Church sees this sacrament as so important that Catholics are bound to confess serious sins at least once a year. We are also encouraged to do so more frequently in order to grow closer to Christ and his Body, the Church. If you have not been to confession in some time, I urge you to go this Lent. In most parishes, the opportunities are plentiful. Take advantage of the extraordinary gift that Christ gave his Church when he told the Apostles in the Upper Room after the Resurrection, “Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them.”

In addition to receiving the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, the Christian community traditionally prepares for Easter by acts of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The Church has established Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as days of fasting and abstinence from meat, and all Fridays of Lent as days of abstinence. This year, however, Lent comes at a time when the bishops of the United States have asked us to do more.

As part of a five-part “Call to Prayer for Life, Marriage, and Religious Liberty,” the bishops of the United States have called us to fast and abstain from meat every Friday, if we are able, during the Year of Faith. This call to prayer is prompted by unprecedented challenges to the Church and the nation, particularly in the area of religious liberty. One year ago the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a mandate under the Affordable Care Act that requires all employer care health plans to provide free contraceptives, sterilizations and abortion-inducing drugs, regardless of the employer’s moral or religious objections. Even some ministries of institutions like Catholic schools, hospitals, and charities may not be considered sufficiently religious to qualify for the mandate’s narrow religious exemption.

While the mandate is being challenged in the courts, the “Call to Prayer” asks that Catholics celebrate Eucharistic holy hours monthly, pray the rosary daily, say special prayers of the faithful at all masses, fast and abstain from meat on Fridays, and observe a second Fortnight for Freedom in June/July of 2013. I urge you to incorporate the first four of these practices into your Lenten disciplines. Religious liberty is not a partisan political issue or sectarian issue, but a human rights concern along with the right to life, food, shelter, health care, education, and decent work. It is an appropriate subject for prayer as well as for political action.

To those of you who have been away from the Church for a while and have decided recently to come back, I want to say welcome home this Lent and Easter. May these sacred seasons bring you the peace, joy, and the fullness of life that comes from living the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Dennis M. Schnurr
Archbishop of Cincinnati