

Enter the desert with Jesus

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Dear brothers and sisters, today we are setting out on a spiritual journey, a pilgrimage of sorts. It is the 40 day journey of Lent, and it's a beautiful journey. I would even say it's a joyful journey, because it brings us closer to the source of all our joy, Jesus Christ our Savior. In many ways, it is a desert journey, because we enter the desert with Jesus and imitate his own time of fasting and prayer. But the desert can be beautiful, and it can transform us.

The kind of transformation that we think of during Lent is conversion, a more radical turning toward God. During these 40 days, we should ask ourselves, what will bring me closer to God? How can I become more like his Son, Jesus? And that very question is the beginning of conversion. It manifests our desire for holiness, our desire to turn away from sin and to turn towards God. In fact, it expresses our desire to be with God, to be one with him

So the first step on our journey should be a resolution to turn away from sin and to receive God's forgiveness. And certainly the most profound way for us to receive that forgiveness is through the sacrament of Reconciliation. As we confess our sins, the mercy of God comes upon us and releases us from the bondage of those sins. We are set free and our hearts are lifted up by God's healing grace. When God sees us in our sinfulness, he has compassion and draws near to us with his mercy. He invites us out of our sinful ways to begin to walk in his life and love, and become more like him.

How often should we go to confession? Often, as often as we become aware that sin is creeping into our lives. As we grow closer to Christ, we see more of our sinfulness and we feel the need to be cleansed more often in this beautiful sacrament. It is a powerful encounter with God's mercy, with the depth of God's love for us. If we stay away from this sacrament, then we begin to feel that we don't need it. But we all need God's forgiveness, and he offers it to us most perfectly in the sacrament of Reconciliation. What a beautiful journey this becomes, as we experience the forgiveness and mercy of Jesus and discover that he is walking along with us.

But mercy is a two way street! During this Lent, we not only seek to receive mercy, but we must also be ready to practice it, to live it. During this Holy Year of Mercy, Pope Francis urges all of us to practice more fervently the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. In the corporal works of mercy, he tells us, "we touch the flesh of Christ in our brothers and sisters, who need to be fed, clothed, sheltered, visited." And in the spiritual works of mercy - counsel, instruction, forgiveness, admonishment, and prayer - we lift up the souls of our neighbors to the

heart of Christ so they too can experience his mercy. Jesus speaks of almsgiving in Matthew's gospel, and he urges us to give unselfishly, without pretense, to be merciful to those in need, whether their need is in body or in spirit. It is a call to love, to be like Christ.

During the days of this journey, it is important to ask ourselves, how we might extend love, consolation, and mercy to those who need it most. Lent invites us to reach out however we can to love and care for those who may be most in need. Lent is our invitation to witness to the truth of redemption wherever we may be. For many of us, myself included, that may be far more challenging than "giving up" some pleasure for the duration of the season. But once again, it becomes an experience of conversion, a turning toward Christ in our neighbor, becoming more like Christ in our love. Our works of mercy may be small and hidden, but bit by bit they will transform our own hearts and make us more able to receive the mercy of God. And with every work of mercy, our journey becomes more beautiful, more joyful.

There is much more that could be said, but these are two concrete resolutions for this journey of Lent: first, to experience mercy through the sacrament of confession; and second, to show mercy through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Our daily prayer will help us to stay on the path, to listen to the voice of God along the way. And our daily fasting will lighten us and help us to receive more easily the fullness of God's grace, and the many gifts that he offers us.

Pope Francis says: "Let us not waste this season of Lent, so favorable a time for conversion!" Let us begin this journey with determination and a desire to become closer to God. And let us ask Mary our Blessed Mother to accompany us on our Lenten journey. May she help us all to deepen our conversion to Christ, and to become better Christians, better followers of Jesus her Son, with a heart that is merciful like his.