



A Lenten Pastoral Letter

On Our Need of Prayer

To be read at all Masses on the First Sunday of Lent

Sunday 18th February 2024

My dear brothers and sisters,

Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit *“into the wilderness”*ⁱ. In the solitude and silence of the desert, Our Lord confronts our temptations and overcomes our spiritual enemy whom He identifies as *“the father of lies”* and *“a murderer from the beginning”*ⁱⁱ. We can recognise the Devil’s activity in our world today in everything which assaults the sanctity of human life and distorts the truth about God and humanity. The 40-days of Lent must lead us to renew the promise of our Baptism: *“I renounce Satan and all his works”*; together with our wholehearted desire to be led by the Holy Spiritⁱⁱⁱ in prayer each day, in frequent confession of our sins and in ever-deepening love for the Holy Eucharist.

The prospect of the long weeks of Lent may be daunting, as we wonder how we will manage to deny ourselves even small things and find the time for more generous prayer and self-giving. Yet, the ‘little desert’ of the weeks ahead will serve to open new horizons in our hearts and help us see everything in our lives in their true perspective. This year we have taken up Pope Francis’s call to rediscover the priority of prayer, knowing a pre-condition for prayer is finding silence *“besieged as we are by ... general noise and uproar, in our seething and over-sensitized modern life”*^{iv}. We need to help each other find this quietness, especially when we come together in church before the silence of the Eucharist. The beautiful silence of our churches helps us give our attention to the Lord and enter intimate conversation with Him. The Devil will always seek to divert us, suggesting there is something more important than prayer, especially prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Yet, the Saints reminds us these are the happiest moments we will spend on earth!^v.

I was recently asked by someone preparing to become a Catholic, what exactly do we speak about in this conversation and silence of prayer? A Saint of 20th Century gave a better answer than mine when he urged a student to speak: *“About Him, and yourself: joys, sorrows, successes and failures, great ambitions, daily worries – even your weaknesses! And acts of thanksgiving and petitions – and love and reparation. In short, to get to know Him and to get to know yourself ...”*^{vi}. In prayer we present the whole of our lives, big things and little things, spiritual things and material things, before the gaze of the One who loves us. In this way we begin to see everything in His light, in the light of His Eucharist.

Last Sunday, I travelled to Lourdes to give thanks on the 40th anniversary of my ordination as a priest. I was there reminded that 14-year-old Bernadette had been called to prayer on a wasteland when gathering sticks and bones in her family’s struggle for survival. The apparitions of Lourdes would consist almost entirely of the silence of prayer in which the first crowds and eventually countless millions would share. The few insistent words Our Lady spoke reminded us of the necessity of prayer and conversion; of intercession for souls destitute in the poverty of sin; and to make a place in all our lives for the Eucharist—our greatest treasure on earth – the answer to the deepest hunger of our hearts. Like Saint Bernadette we are led by the Holy Spirit into the silence of prayer to see our lives anew and recognise the greatness of our calling. May Our Lady stand with us in our poverty and help us recognise our need of God, our need of the Holy Eucharist, our need of prayer!

May the days of Lent be so blessed for us all,

+ *Mark*

Bishop of Shrewsbury

ⁱ Cf. Mt. 4: 1, Mk. 1: 12

ⁱⁱ Jn. 8: 44, 45

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. CCC 540

^{iv} Pope Saint Paul VI, Address 5th January 1964

^v Cf. Catechesis of Saint John Mary Vianney on Prayer

^{vi} Saint Josemaria Escriva, The Way No 91