

Lenten Pastoral Message

Right Reverend Mark O'Toole

Bishop of Plymouth

Lenten Pastoral Message from the Bishop of Plymouth, the Right Reverend Mark O'Toole, Chair of the Department of Evangelisation and Discipleship

War has come again to Europe. It is almost unimaginable for us who have lived in peace for so long. Our hearts and our prayers go out to the Ukrainian people and to all peace-loving Russians. We also pray and hope for the conversion of hearts and minds of those bent on war and aggression.

Given the reality of this war, Pope Francis has asked us all to observe Ash Wednesday as a Day of Prayer and Fasting for Peace. We all feel somewhat impotent. What can we do? Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, a season marked by the disciplines of Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving. This year, these have a particular focus for us, as we link these spiritual weapons to the reality of what we are living through in Europe at this time.

Firstly, is the weapon of prayer. The Mass is the most fruitful prayer in which we participate. I strongly urge all Catholics to go to Mass this Ash Wednesday to pray for Peace. Receiving ashes will have a particular poignancy as we recall the fragility of human life. We pray that all may turn from the road of hatred and of violence – Repent and believe in the Gospel!

I urge all Catholics, too, to take up again their regular attendance at Sunday Mass. Lent can be a time to renew this. Physical attendance at Mass, for those who are able, can be a practise that is lived in these days as an act of solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are suffering. We believe in 'the economy of Grace'. Where we do not find love, we pour love in, in the hope that eventually we can draw love out. As members of Christ's One Body, we know that when one part of the Body suffers, we all suffer. As we worship and adore God at Mass, we unite ourselves with Jesus' offering to the Father on the Cross. We pray that the fruits of the Lord's sacrifice be bestowed on our sisters and brothers enduring the pain of war. So please, I urge you, return to being physically present at Mass, if you are able.

Secondly, is the weapon of fasting. Fasting entails denying ourselves some good, usually some food, but it can also be some particular enjoyment, such as watching TV or using the Internet or social media. It is a personal sacrifice, but also an act of solidarity with those who are poor, who are denied these things in daily life. How shocking it has been for us to see the scenes of panic food and fuel-buying in Ukraine, of the very real sacrifices forced on people as a result of war. Fasting brings us closer to them. It also puts us in touch with our own vulnerability, can even make us feel a little weak. But we do so to remember our dependence on God, Creator of all that is good, and in order that the fruits of Jesus Passion may be bestowed on those who are truly hungry, who really have to go without.

And then there is the weapon of almsgiving, of charitable giving. We know that this war means steeper energy and food prices. This will be felt most deeply by the poorest in our communities. It requires greater generosity from those of us who have more. The war will also lead to many refugees. I hope our countries will be generous in receiving these desperate brothers and sisters fleeing for safety from war in their homeland. May this Lent indeed help us to be more sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, both at home, and in Ukraine.

It has been made clear by our political leaders that we will not be taking a physical part in this war in Ukraine. We can be grateful for this, that we will not have to participate in the terrible bloodshed. Yet, we all want to do something to bring an end to this terrible war. So, we undertake the sacrifices of love during this Lent - prayer, fasting and almsgiving - as spiritual weapons to bring God's grace into a situation which is so desperate, and where it seems as though God is absent. Through His power and action, God can bring his redemptive love to bear on this and all dire situations, in ways unseen or unknown to us. Our acts of prayer, of fasting, of almsgiving, aid us in participating in God's redemptive action, united with all those who believe, with all those who suffer, with all those who long for an end to this war. United, too, with Mary, the first of the disciples, who is Queen of Peace, we continuously intercede, "Stop the war!"

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