



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF TIKOLHO E KATHOLIKE EA ISIFUNDABHISHOBHI SASE

JOHANNESBURG

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PASTORAL LETTER 4 MARY, PILGRIMAGE AND PENANCE

From time immemorial, pilgrimages to the Marian Shrine have always been associated with penance. Pilgrims acknowledge human brokenness and a deep desire to be made whole again. Undertaking a journey to go on pilgrimage is in itself considered an act of penance. For example, pilgrims walk from their villages and towns to go to the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima yearly on May 13th. Penitent pilgrims within the precinct of the Shrine make their way to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe on their knees. Where Stations of the Cross are erected on the hillside, as the pilgrims climb the hill, they call to mind the Way of the Cross of Christ Himself (via crucis). It is customary for pilgrims who go to the Basilica of St. James in Compostela, Spain, to walk the last part of their journey on foot. Pilgrimage means a break-away from the familiar in order to insert ourselves into a different spiritual environment. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is an integral part of the different spiritual exercises. A penitent with a broken heart seeks God's mercy and a cure: "in your tenderness wipe away my faults" (Ps. 50.1).

On our journey to the Mother of Mercy Shrine, we identify ourselves with Mary who accompanied her Son on His way to Calvary. Her Son bore His cross. We too have our minds, hearts and souls burdened. We are in search of relief and consolation. As pilgrims we symbolically identify with Mary as she stood at the foot of the cross. She stood there like a tower of strength in one of the most devastating moments of her life. This is the image many mothers carry in their hearts as they face turmoil in their families; as they face abject poverty, abuse, rape, exploitation and rejection by husbands whose solemn vows evaporated soon after they were pronounced.

Mary beneath the cross conjures up images of a mother whose child is consumed by illness or destroyed by drugs or who languishes in prison, or struggles to find a job. Mary stood firm and strong in the face of the mighty and powerful who ordered that her Son be mercilessly nailed to the cross. It is this admirable strength and confidence which parents seek when they go on pilgrimage. The healing words of Jesus are not lost on penitent pilgrims when He says: "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23.34).

Every penitent pilgrim prays fervently in order to experience the power of forgiveness in his or her heart. The refrain: "pray for us sinners" in the 'Ave Maria', and the refrain: "forgive us our trespasses" in the 'Our Father,' underscore the internal disposition of the penitent pilgrim. For the pilgrim, forgiveness means to be released from the burdens that weigh us down and leave us weak, vulnerable, and gasping for air. Forgiveness lifts up drooping spirits, inspires confidence and the courage to be of service to others.

Forgiveness triggers off the “new person” in us and makes us want to put on the mask of Christ, to be Christ-like for as long as our physical and spiritual energies permit us (Gal. 2.20). Hence the devotion of pilgrims to Mother Mary who never tires to bring her children closer to her Son. Pope Paul VI observes that after all, “the ultimate purpose of devotion to the Blessed Virgin is to glorify God” and to exhort Christians to embrace fully the demands of the Gospel, (Marialis cultus no.39). There is therefore a close movement between the act of venerating Mary, the growing acknowledgement of Christ as Lord, and the change of heart of the penitent pilgrim.

Being on a pilgrimage brings back to mind that Mary is the Lady of Sorrows, “Mater Dolorosa,” who suffered grievously with Her Son. She is the “blushing rose,” (rubens rosa) that bore pain with dignity. Throughout the history of Christianity, the narration of the Passion of Christ would be considered incomplete without the visible presence of Mary. Pilgrims, mindful of their own unworthiness rallied around Mary as the “efficacious companion,” their “powerful intercessor,” advocate and “Associate of the Redeemer” (M. Rubin, 132,243,250). Mary is considered as the New Eve who through her Son, “unmade” the sin of the old Eve.

Mary, because of her Immaculate Conception, “leads her children to combat sin with energy and resoluteness” (Marialis cultus no.57). Pope Paul VI asserts that “it is impossible to honour her who is ‘full of grace’ without thereby honouring in oneself, the state of grace, which is friendship with God” (Marialis cultus no.57).

A Marian pilgrimage has about it a somber feeling of a Lenten Season. The ingredients of Lent, namely: a quiet environment, the reading of the Word of God, participating in the Eucharist, reciting the Rosary during the Stations of the Cross, fasting and committing oneself to works of charity. The Sacrament of Penance occupies a centre stage because, in the words of Pope Francis: it “enables people to touch the grandeur of God’s mercy with their own hands” (The Face of Mercy, no.17). It liberates. It gives one a glimpse of what possibly Redemption could mean. It offers one the kind of overwhelming feeling the Prodigal Son had upon being received back by his merciful father. It is the spirit of Mary, the Merciful Mother, that helps to create a welcoming disposition among pilgrims in search of the healing power of God’s mercy.

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Good Friday. 14/04/2017

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