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### LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2011

# Lent: Jesus and Our Ascent to Jerusalem

To the priests, deacons, religious and all the faithful,

***Grace to you and peace from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:2).***

As we begin Lent and strive to unite ourselves more closely to the Lord in our daily lives, I wish to offer you the following meditation on Jesus' ascent to the Cross and our journey with him as his disciples.

As a young boy growing up in Szczecinek, Poland, Marek Rybinski was thoughtful and caring. As a member of his parish youth group, he would listen attentively to the hurts of others and offer them words of comfort and understanding. When in high school, two of his friends asked him to come with them to visit some Salesian priests. He was immediately taken up with their mission. He wanted to be a priest. He wanted to help the young find Christ.

Marek was ordained a priest in May 2005. Father Marek left Poland in 2007 to work in Tunisia. The work was not easy. The challenges were great. In the Salesian school at Manouba, he loved teaching the young children about the Lord. He was very happy and at peace.

Recently, he confided to one of his classmates from high school that certain individuals had approached him and told him to stop telling the children about Jesus. When he said that he would not stop, they warned him that something could happen to him. A few days later they repeated the same demand. But Father Marek again responded that he would continue to teach others about Jesus.

A few days later, on the morning of Feb. 18, 2011, his body was found in the school parking lot. Stabbed. His throat slashed. Bishop Maroun Elias Nimeh Lahham of Tunis labeled his death as "A criminal act that does not exclude other motives." A martyr for the faith.

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Following Jesus always means martyrdom. Somehow this can get lost in our understanding of discipleship today. Every disciple is called to be a martyr, a witness to Jesus, sometimes even to the point of death. It is on this fundamental truth that I would like to offer a brief reflection as we enter the holy season of Lent.

By the end of his life, Jesus faced the fierce opposition of his enemies. Good always will be opposed. The resurrection of Lazarus from the grave became the occasion for Jesus' adversaries to solidify their plans to do away with him. Knowing their intention, Jesus withdrew into the wilderness south and east of Jerusalem (*Jn 11:54*). This was the very same region where Jesus had spent forty days alone after his baptism by John before he began his public ministry.

Here he had faced Satan. The temptations in the desert were real. They were hard. And they were decisive. God allowed Jesus to be tempted in his humanity not to make him fall, but to strengthen him and to make him rise to meet the challenges of his ministry. Saying 'no' to Satan, Jesus forged his human resolve to follow the Father's plan. Each of us faces temptations again and again. They are always moments to say 'no' to what is evil, to say a resounding 'yes' to what is good and to draw closer to God, as Jesus himself did.

Now as Jesus' public ministry draws to a close, Jesus returns to the place where he committed himself to the Father's will. He knows that suffering and death are inescapable if he is to remain faithful to his mission. No doubt as he remembers his previous victory over every temptation to take the easy way out, he grows stronger in his determination not to back down. And, so he says to his disciples, "Now we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man is about to be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes. They will condemn him and put him to death...and after three days he will rise again" (*Mk 10:33-34*).

The first evangelist gives us a very graphic image at this point. Full of serene resolve, Jesus begins the rocky ascent from the desert to Jerusalem. He goes first. The disciples follow, even though they do not understand. As Mark tells us, the disciples "were in a daze, and those who followed him were apprehensive" (*Mk 10:32*). This is not simply a narrative detail, but a theological truth. True discipleship means following the Lord, even when we do not fully understand.

Who of us can ever understand the meaning of suffering and death in our own lives? Yet, we follow the Lord who leads the way from the grave to glory. Like the psalmist, we say with confidence, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (*Ps 23:4*).

The small company of disciples follows Jesus on the ascent from Jericho to Jerusalem. Perhaps even today, we should take courage that the power of the Gospel is not in numbers, but in the commitment of those who resolutely follow the Lord. With steady purpose emblazoned on his face, Jesus walks in haste, ahead of the disciples. His calm manner and eager readiness cast a veil of silent incomprehension on his followers. But, he is the Master and so they follow. So often in life, there is need to return to this attitude, this willingness, to let Jesus take us where he wants us to be.

Jesus and the disciples make their way up the rocky mountain. The 17-mile road rises 3,600 feet. The route is winding, steep and treacherous. An apt symbol for our Lenten journey. Jesus leads us in the way of discipleship that is not easy. There is a stringent moral code to observe for those who accept the call to be Christian.

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In the Sermon on the Mount (*Mt 5-7*), Jesus explains this moral code. As Moses ascended Mount Sinai and gave Israel the Torah, Jesus ascends the mount as the New Moses. He gives a new Torah. In his longest teaching in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus explains the new and higher standards for his followers in keeping the law, in practicing religion and worship and in extending charity to others in works of social outreach.

However, unlike Moses, Jesus gives the new Torah with his own divine authority. His Torah is the response of love of all those who have passed through the waters of Baptism and form the New Israel. In listening to the Sermon on the Mount, we may well be hearing Jesus speak through the mouth of an early Christian catechist preparing adult converts for their new life in the community of believers.

At a time when many simply dismiss the human response to God's grace as of no importance and hold that everyone will be saved, we are reminded of the ultimate consequences of our actions. Toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns us of the seriousness of our response. He says, "Broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But ... narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (*Mt 7:13-14*).

The *Didache*, a catechism dating from the first or second century, repeats Jesus' warning: "There are two Ways, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the two Ways." To follow Christ is always a free choice. He leads, but we must choose to come after him. Every day, in family life, in work, in school, with friends and with even the casual passer-by, we make moral choices that either embrace life or choose death.

Lent is the holy season when the Church prepares her catechumens to turn from the death of sin to the new life of the Risen Lord. She readies them to receive baptism, confirmation and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. During this time, all those already baptized renew their effort to live the Christian life. Like Jesus' own 40 days in the desert, we renew our efforts to make the right moral choices, turning from evil in our lives and embracing God's will for us.

During Lent, we intensify our prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These three traditional practices, taken from the Sermon on the Mount, open us more fully to God's grace. They help us keep more readily Jesus' commandments to love God and one another. These penitential practices strengthen our will to choose the good so that we are more eager following Jesus along the Way.

In speaking of the Lenten discipline, St. Peter Chrysologus, the 5th century bishop of Ravenna, taught, "There are three things...by which faith stands firm, devotion remains constant, and virtue endures. They are prayer, fasting and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains, mercy receives. Prayer, mercy and fasting: these three are one, and they give life to each other" (*Sermo 43*).

By more individual prayer during Lent and, if possible, even daily Mass, by observing the Lenten fast and even giving up on our own certain legitimate pleasures, by extending even greater charity to others than we normally do, we are better prepared to turn from evil and to choose the good. All the practices of Lent center our attention on God's grace. They also make us more conscious of the choices that we make each day.

We can never estimate the awesome responsibility of our human freedom. Nor can we forget that there are consequences to our choices of good or evil. Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI recently

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reminded us of this. He said, "Man can choose an easy path and avoid every effort. He can also sink to the low and the vulgar. He can flounder in the swamps of falsehood and dishonesty. Jesus walks before us and towards the heights. He leads us to what is great, pure. He leads us to that healthy air of the heights: to life in accordance with the truth... He leads us to stand loyally by the other, even when the situation becomes difficult. He leads us to the readiness to give help...to the goodness that does not let itself be disarmed, even by ingratitude. He leads us to love. He leads us to God." (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 25th World Youth Day, March 28, 2010)

Certainly, we can take the easy path, choosing what pleases us, indulging our desires and passions. And sometimes we do. We sin. Hence our need for repentance and frequent use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But we can also take the more arduous path, choosing what is good for others. We can follow Christ through self-sacrifice love on the road that leads us ultimately to the Cross.

This Lent, may we make our own the words of Jesus, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem" (Mt 20:18). We are going to Jerusalem where all humanity is saved by Christ's Death and Resurrection. We are becoming more united with Christ who takes us up from the mire of sin to the pure air of God's love. We are being lifted up to the heights of heaven and entering even now the New Jerusalem.

This Lent, may each of us make our lives repeat the words of Psalm 122, "I rejoiced when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" In this way, when we come to celebrate the Easter mysteries, we may say, with great confidence and joy, in the words of the same psalm, "And now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem."

*Given at the Pastoral Center of the  
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the 9th of March, 2011.*

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