



DIOCESE OF PATERSON

Diocesan Center
777 Valley Road
Clifton, New Jersey 07013

Office of
THE BISHOP

(973) 777-8818 Fax (973) 777-8976

LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2015

THE GREAT BANQUET AND THE PASCHAL FEAST

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

“May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance”

(Jude v. 1)

[1] From the very first pages of Sacred Scripture to the last, God shows his love and compassion by providing food for humankind. In the biblical account of creation, God does not simply create Adam and Eve. He cares for them and provides the very food they are to eat. To our first parents, God says, “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food...” (Gen 1:29; cf. Gen 2:16). And, on the final pages of Scripture, God calls his people to the fullness of joy in the wedding feast of the Lamb (cf. Rev 19:7-10).

[2] In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah looked forward to the day when God would bring to completion his plan for salvation by offering the messianic banquet. Isaiah predicted that, at the end of time, when God’s enemies and death itself are destroyed, “the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines” (Is 25:6).

[3] That eschatological banquet is a constant leitmotif in the life of Jesus. At the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus heralds this messianic feast promised by Isaiah. At Cana, when the wine provided by the bride and bridegroom runs out, Jesus turns more than one hundred and twenty gallons of water into a choice wine of rare vintage. More wine than can be consumed by the already sated guests. A sign of the abundance of the last times.

[4] During his ministry, Jesus feeds the five thousand men, not counting the women and children. The miracle is so unforgettable that all four evangelists record it (Mt 15:32-16:10; Mk 6:31-44; Lk 9:10-17 and Jn 6:5-15). The miracle begins with five loaves of barley bread and two dried fish, but it ends with twelve baskets overflowing with the left-overs. More food at the end than at the beginning. Again a foreshadowing of the final banquet when God will provide enough for us to feast on forever.

[5] Throughout his ministry, Jesus often uses a banquet or meal either as an occasion to teach about the kingdom of God or to usher it in. In fact, at the Last Supper, when wine turns into blood, he gives his Church the way to share, even now, in the eschatological banquet. He gives us the Eucharist where we are at table with Jesus in the Upper Room and at God’s banquet in heaven.

[6] When Jesus’ contemporaries looked at his ministry, many thrilled to his teaching, marveled at his mira-

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cles and stood in awe at his exorcisms. But, beyond the preaching, the healing and the mighty works, there was one aspect of his ministry that his enemies consistently found offensive. His table-fellowship with sinners. So often is Jesus either at a meal, going to a meal or leaving a meal, that his enemies grumble, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Lk 7:34).

[7] Jesus justifies his table-fellowship with sinners by announcing that "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost" (Lk 19:10). It is quite significant that Jesus makes this remark in the course of a meal in the home of the notorious and hated tax-collector Zacchaeus. It was in sharing meals with both the pious and the sinner that Jesus not only taught about the kingdom, but made the kingdom of God open to all and offered them a place at the final banquet.

[8] Ten times in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is found at table with others. He dines with friends such as Martha and Mary (Lk 10:38-40) and with his own disciples (Lk 24:28-32; 24:36-43). He shares a meal with the crowds who follow him (Lk 9:10-17). He accepts the hospitality of the religious leaders and the elite (Lk 7:36; 11:37-52; 14:1-24). And, he is not afraid to sit at table with the outcasts and sinners (Lk 5:27-32; 19:1-10). No other New Testament writing emphasizes the table-fellowship of Jesus as does that of Luke. In fact, "in approximately one-fifth of the sentences in Luke's Gospel and in Acts, meals play a conspicuous role" (Markus Barth, *Rediscovering the Lord's Supper*, p. 71). Why is this table-fellowship so important for Jesus?

[9] In every culture, meals are a strong expression of friendship and acceptance. In Jesus' day, people were clearly divided by social position and religious practice. At meals, these boundaries were especially observed. People knew with whom they could eat. They knew where they were not welcome. Jesus demonstrated a total freedom from the restrictive conventions of his day. His choice of dinner companions was deliberately inclusive. He was offering God's grace to all.

[10] In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells a parable whose theological truth ranks it next to the famous parable of the Prodigal Son. It is the parable of the Great Banquet. Everything Jesus says about divine mercy and human response is contained in this magnificent story. Everything Jesus taught by his own table-fellowship with others is brought to light in this memorable tale. And, Jesus tells this parable in the context of a meal.

[11] One day, a leader of the Pharisees invites Jesus for a Sabbath meal. Jesus graciously accepts the invitation. In the course of the dinner, he notices the guests jostling for seats of honor. He understands the secret motives of those present, including his host. They invite only those individuals who add to their own prestige and can repay them in kind. Jesus first instructs them on the humility and disinterested charity necessary for the kingdom of God. Then, in response to a guest who exclaims, "Blessed is he who eats bread in the kingdom of God," (Lk 14:15), Jesus tells the Parable of the Great Banquet.

A man gave a great dinner to which he invited many. When the time for the dinner came, he dispatched his servant to say to those invited, "Come, everything is now ready." But one by one, they all began to excuse themselves. The first said to him, "I have purchased a field and must go to examine it; I ask you, consider me excused." And another said, "I have purchased five yoke of oxen and am on my way to evaluate them; I ask you, consider me excused." And another said, "I have just married a woman, and therefore I cannot come." The servant went and reported this to his master. Then the master of the house in a rage commanded his servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in here the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame." The servant reported, "Sir, your orders have been carried out and still there is room." The master then ordered the servant, "Go out to the highways and hedgerows and make people come in that my home may be filled." (Lk 14:16-24)

[12] Jesus' listeners were anxiously waiting for the moment when God would break into history to usher in the kingdom of God. They were expecting that, when he did, God would provide a great feast for his people. As Jesus tells this parable, they immediately think of that banquet and the arrival of the kingdom of God. They judge themselves as the ones worthy to take part in this banquet. But, Jesus challenges their narrow-mindedness with a glimpse at the mercy of God.

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[13] According to the custom of the time, a host would always send two invitations to his guests. The first invitation would simply announce the day of the great banquet. In order to prepare for the feast, the host had to know in advance the number of guests. If there were only a few people, he would serve chicken. If there were more than thirty-five guests, he would butcher a calf. In a time when people did not regulate their lives by the hours on a wrist watch, the second invitation would come on the day of the banquet, informing the guests that everything was ready.

[14] In the parable, those invited accept the first invitation. At the minimum, the host slaughters one calf. This is going to be a lavish banquet. But, then, when the second invitation comes, the invited guests, one by one, excuse themselves. Their reasons for no longer coming are pathetic. No one would buy a field without first having thoroughly examined it, determined its stone wall boundaries and calculated its anticipated rain-fall. No one would buy five yoke of oxen without first having plowed with them to see if they were fit for work. And, certainly, no bridegroom would ever have accepted the first invitation if his wedding was on the same day.

[15] Jesus deliberately chooses these three excuses because they are so ludicrous. No one would ever seriously offer them to a man of prestige as is the host of this banquet. With a bit of humor, Jesus is lampooning the lame excuses that we so often place in the way of responding to God's invitation to feast at his table. God is ever ready to offer us his love and mercy. Yet, we let work, possessions, emotions and human affection keep us from entering into a deeper relationship with God. How foolish not to place God first!

[16] During Lent, prayer, fasting and almsgiving help us put our priorities in order. These Lenten practices focus us on God, his presence in our lives and in others. They discipline our body and train our will to put God first. Is not this the meaning of Jesus' temptations in the desert? For forty days, he fasted and prayed so that, in his human nature, he would always will to put God first. Every day, we need to make the effort to put God first.

[17] Jesus carefully crafts the three excuses of the rude guests in the parable from his own store of biblical knowledge. In Deuteronomy 20:5-7 and 24:5, these same excuses were accepted as reasons not to take part in a holy war. His audience, learned in the Scriptures, gets his point. What was once a valid exemption is no more. Jesus is waging a campaign to establish the kingdom of God. The moment is urgent. No time to delay a response. The gospels record Jesus crying twice. Both times at death. At the death of his friend Lazarus (Jn 11:35). And, at the death of good intentions when Jerusalem delays responding to his invitation to enter the kingdom and, thus, insures its own destruction (Lk 19:41). May we respond today!

[18] In a healthy self-examination of conscience, so necessary in preparing to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we may linger over our sins that keep us from responding to God's presence in our lives. But, in the parable that Jesus tells, he redirects our perspective. He emphasizes not our sins, but God's unremitting offer of grace. As Isaiah the prophet said, God is ready to "sweep away our offenses like a cloud, our sins like a mist" (Is 44:22).

[19] Jesus uses the details in the Parable of the Great Banquet to show how much God desires all to accept his invitation. The double invitation to the original guests. After their refusal, two more invitations to others. The bringing in of the substitute guests. Those from inside the town, the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame, representing the outcasts of Jewish society. Those from outside the town representing the Gentiles. There is no road that God does not take to reach us, even the road to Calvary.

[20] Jesus' death on the cross was no common death. Our guilt condemned the innocent One. Our shameless deeds fashioned the ignominy of the cross. Our sinful pleasure pierced him through with unutterable pain. Knowing what was before him, Jesus said, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own" (Jn 10:18). Jesus goes to the cross, because this is God's will to save the world. As Jesus explains to the Greeks in the last week of his life, "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself" (Jn 12:32). Because of the cross, God "casts aside . . . no one of His servants, loathes no one as unworthy of His divine mysteries . . . having mercy on all, and desiring to save all, wanting to make all sons

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of God..." (St. Hippolytus, *De Antichristo* 3). This is God's grace.

[21] This is not the "cheap grace we bestow on ourselves ...the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance ...grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate...[It is] costly grace... which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 43-44).

[22] In Christ Crucified and Risen, present in the Eucharist, the Father sets before us the eschatological feast. Christ himself, the Lamb slain who dies no more, is the feast of truth for our questioning minds, the pardon for our sinful wills and the joy for all our yearnings and desires. He is the bread that nourishes us during our earthly pilgrimage. The true manna come down from heaven. He is the wine that cheers our hearts and lifts up our souls. Thus, every Eucharist is the banquet that Isaiah predicted for the end time, the Messianic meal that Jesus anticipated with the miraculous feeding of the thousands and made real at the Last Supper.

[23] When we celebrate Mass, "we are united to the heavenly 'liturgy' and become part of that great multitude which cries out: 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!' (*Rev* 7:10). The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey" (Pope St. John Paul, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 19).

[24] Jesus began his Parable of the Great Banquet with the imperative: "Come, everything is now ready." He ended the parable with the same urgent request, "Make people come in that my home may be filled." Our place is ready. The door is still open. And, God is waiting for us. It is all grace. It is all a free gift. *It is our awesome responsibility to respond to his invitation today.*

[25] May our deepened prayer, disciplined fasting and generous almsgiving during this Lent help us to respond and prepare us for the Easter Mysteries, when we sit at table with the Lord and share in the riches of his grace. May it be said of each of us, "Blessed is the one who eats bread in the kingdom of God" (Lk 14:15).

*Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson, on
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Our Lord, two thousand and fifteen.*



Most Reverend Arthur J. Serratelli,
S.T.D., S.S.L., D.D.
Bishop of Paterson



Sr. Mary Edward Spohrer, SCC,
Chancellor/Delegate for Religious