

Lenten Pastoral Letter 2023

A Time of Kairos: Freedom, Formation, and Merciful Love

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

“All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.” At this, Jesus said to him, “Get away, Satan! It is written: *The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.*” (Matthew 4:9-10)

For many of us who have gained weight throughout the Christmas Season and the Lunar New Year, we should marvel at the wisdom in the liturgical year. There is the Lenten Season following shortly after these seasonal celebrations. And Lent is an excellent time for us to slim down our excesses, including our “unfreedoms” that keep us away from God as well as that unhealthy weight. Of course, the latter should not be the primary focus of our Lenten discipline, but our life-giving relationships with our God, others, nature, and ourselves.

The scriptural passage taken from the gospel reading of this year’s First Sunday of Lent reminds us of the empty promises of the evil spirit and that part of our world that denies God. They are working hard to make us believe that their promises are too attractive to be missed, realistic, sensible, and that we would lose out badly should we not take their offers.

Yet, what we would sacrifice should we take their offers would not be known to us readily, unless we are willing and able to enter into a discernment with an open mind and a listening heart, together with honest sharing of our options and reservations with our companions walking with us. Besides, having a prayerful inner disposition throughout the process should be recommended.

However, what is written in the above is not cultivated in mainstream culture, including that of our Church. It is, nonetheless, an integral feature of a synodal Church as well as a dialogic culture for peaceful coexistence. Hence, it requires our willingness to re-orient ourselves toward the Spirit of God, who leads us towards unity in Christ our Lord. The same Spirit also empowers us to witness for the life-giving messages of the Gospel in this epochal time of Hong Kong and our world. We shall never be lonely or lost as long as we are willing to embark on a transforming process of metanoia returning to our Lord Jesus who has called us to follow him.

This year we can expect to celebrate around 1,700 baptisms at Easter. It is, however, half of the number of baptisms that we used to have. The reduced numbers are due to different factors, partly our own doing, but others are beyond our control. First, we have these new sisters and brothers to celebrate with, to welcome them into our community of Catholic faith. They are invaluable gifts from our God that should be treasured by us who are sisters and brothers of their new family. Second, their respective parishes and spiritual communities should provide them with ongoing formation and accompanying communities so that they can continue growing in their newly embraced faith.

As a diocese, we will continue with the planning and implementing of our formation for our youth, laity, and clergy. We have, through our ongoing discernment, identified the

immediate needs for formation of our clergy and youth at the initial stage. This does not mean laity is less important. Rather, we see that unless done with proper understanding and support of our priests and deacons, formation for our young people and laity will be undesirably discounted. But with their collaboration and support, formation for our youth and lay people can be better implemented.

Last but certainly not least, I want to call upon our sisters and brothers to take this Lenten Season for a time of repentance and renewal, to witness to who we are: People of God called to be agents of love and justice that springs from God's mercy. While Hong Kong and the world are trying to stand up from the repeated blows of the COVID pandemic, we are called to reach out to help each other, especially those who are financially stricken or socially marginalised, to stand on our feet.

This is, indeed, a time of Kairos when we are ready to put the recovery of others before ours. And we have an excellent Teacher who has taught us so well with His own self-emptying love. Furthermore, in the same spirit, we can evangelise our society through our actions of mercy, empathy, and hospitality, especially for the immigrants, foreign workers and asylum seekers among us.

May I take this opportunity to pray for a meaningful and fruitful Lenten Season for all of us!

+ Stephen Chow, S.J.

14 February 2023