

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

At the beginning of Lent this year, I would like for you to hear the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17). Everybody has some difficulty with Jesus' invitation to repent. We are almost never in a hurry to repent. Great Fast with its requirements to fast, pray and give alms, is a season that some of us prefer conveniently to forget, much less enjoy. Maybe we enjoy Pascha, but not the Great Fast.

Many times, the faithful perceive Christianity as being oppressive, sad and rigid. Although we pray, regularly attend Sunday liturgies, and listen to the homilies, still we do not change in conformity to Christ. Why is this? It is a consequence of not understanding what it means to repent. In simplified terms, the characters in the Old Testament heard the message, "Change your life and God will have mercy on you."

However, in the person of Jesus Christ came the crucial change. God is turning toward mankind since the human person, on his own, is not capable of repentance. That the heavenly kingdom "is at hand" means that God came among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the heavenly kingdom. With him, the kingdom of love, and not the kingdom of justice and retribution, begins. God began the repentance for men in Jesus Christ.

For this reason, the word "repent," when spoken by Jesus, does not mean, "You need to change and you will be saved," but rather, "You are saved, therefore change your life," as we are on our way to theosis. "Christ was made man that we might be made God" (Athanasius of Alexandria). Thus, God gave you heaven and you must no longer live as you lived before. God took upon himself the consequences of our sins. He humiliated himself. He raised our sins on the holy cross and saved us forever. Fully aware and joyful that we are saved from the power of sin, we are invited by Christ to repentance.

This is the basic mission of Christians. We cannot live only for ourselves. Rather, we need to live for this world that does not know God. Who is really converted? The one who believes in what Jesus Christ accomplished by his death and resurrection, the one who believes in Jesus Christ, who accepts him in his life. A man who is fully converted is a man who joyfully gives the Lord first place in his life, who belongs to Jesus, who believes that to live without Jesus is impossible.

The converted Christians, priests, monks and bishops are authentic. They offer testimony to others. You recognize a true converted Christian by his or her words and deeds. The example of our blessed martyred bishops, Theodore Romzha, Peter Paul Gojdich and Basil Hopko, attracts not only our faithful but others as well. Dear brothers and sisters, especially as we are celebrating 50th anniversary year of our eparchy, we are invited during this Lenten period to repent.

The liturgical texts of Vespers and Matins encourage us to do this. In particular, one of the text for the beginning of Cheesefare week says "...may the fast be our food." In other words may the metanoia, conversion, repentance, changed heart and changed thinking be your spiritual nourishment. I invite you to participate in these services in our parishes as a community and to make a good confession. We need these gifts of the church, believe me. I wish and pray for you to have open hearts, joyful and persevering toward repentance. The time is now.

+ Bishop Milan Lach, SJ