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LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER TO THE PRIESTS, RELIGIOUS MEN AND WOMEN
AND THE LAY FAITHFUL OF THE NAVRONGO-BOLGATANGA DIOCESE
LENT 2018

*“Little Children, Let us not love in word and speech but
in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3,18).*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. With these words of exhortation from the Apostle John, I would like to welcome all of you to the holy season of Lent and to wish you a fruitful spiritual encounter with the Lord. This text of the First Letter of St John was the theme of the first ever World Day of the Poor instituted by the Holy Father Pope Francis which we celebrated on the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, precisely on the 19th of November 2017. In view of the importance of this theme for our Christian vocation in general and its intrinsic link, in particular, with the spirit of the season of Lent, I would like to share with you a few thoughts on it as we begin this period of spiritual exercises.
2. The season of Lent usually invites us to return to the roots of our Christian life, to the spirit of the Gospel with its radical call to conversion. *“The Kingdom of God is at hand, Repent and believe in the gospel”* (Mk 1,15). During this season, aided most especially, by the Word of God and the sacraments Baptism, Penance and the Eucharist, in particular, we are invited not only to celebrate our dignity as beloved children of God (cf 1 Jn 3,1) but also, and most especially, to recognize our brokenness and our constant need for healing (cf Ps 51,3-7.) In this way we come to celebrate jointly at Easter the resurrection of Christ our redeemer and our own return to a renewed and reinvigorated spiritual life.
3. By instituting *World Day of the Poor*, Pope Francis said he wanted Christian communities throughout the world to “become an **ever-greater sign of Christ’s charity** for the least and those most in need”. To this end, the Holy Father said he was inviting “the whole Church, men and women of good will everywhere, to turn their gaze on this day to all those **who stretch out their hands and plead for our help and solidarity**. They are our brothers and sisters, created and loved by the one Heavenly Father” (n.6). Indeed, he wanted Christians everywhere to be concrete examples of what he calls Jesus’s preferential love for the poor.

4. “*Let us not love in word and speech but in deed and in truth*”. If there is any season of the year which offers us great opportunity to heed the invitation of the pope to turn our gaze to those who stretch out their hands and plead for our help, it is rightly the season of Lent. During this period inspired by a spirit of prayer and sacrifice we are well disposed to see the outstretched hands of those who plead for our help and solidarity.
5. First of all, in this period of sustained prayer we are able to recognize our own status as **beggars** before our heavenly Father. Pope Francis, indeed, draws our attention to this fact when he explained that the *Our Father* is fundamentally a prayer of beggars. Asking for our daily bread expresses our dependence on God for our basic needs in life. According to the pope, everything that Jesus taught us in this prayer expresses and brings together the cry of all who suffer from life’s uncertainties and the lack of what they need. And we all lack one thing or the other!
6. Furthermore, the fact that the *Our Father* is said in the plural “means that the bread for which we ask is “ours” and therefore entails sharing, participation and joint responsibility. In this beautiful prayer, the Holy Father continues, “all of us recognize our need to overcome every form of selfishness, in order to enter into the joy of mutual acceptance”.
7. St John exhorts us in his letter to go beyond mere words and speech in our expression of solidarity with those who plead for help. Since charity begins at home, we should be the first to admit our own state of poverty and need for help, and to fight the constant temptation in us to feel self-sufficient, omnipotent and even immortal. To this end the liturgy of Ash Wednesday is very instructive in drawing our attention to our fragility and sinfulness before the all Holy God. We would be the most pitiable of people when we fail to recognise our weaknesses, our limitations and our need for help or assistance from others.
8. Recognising our own state of poverty disposes us to meet the gaze and the outstretched hand of the other in need and to see the face of Christ in him or her. At the personal level, there are so many concrete ways we can let our love go beyond mere **words and speech** during this season of prayer.
To begin with, it is important to live in the awareness that we are not the centre of everything and that others also have a right to be here, to belong to the world (our common house), to the society, to the family, to the Church etc. Authentic Christian spirituality compels us to eschew an exclusive mentality because by vocation we are children of the one Father and Creator of the world. Secondly, we need to consciously put the needs of those who live and work with us before our own (Phil 2,4). St Paul admonishes us further, to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility to regard others as better than yourselves” (Phil 2, 3). Finally, our gestures of

love and solidarity in the spirit of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are a concrete manifestation of love that goes beyond mere words and speech.

9. Being conscious of our own struggles to fight the temptation to feel self-sufficient and independent equally disposes us to discern and to recognise the need and the pleas of those who are unable to stretch out their hands out of fear or shame or out of sheer pride. For all we know, there are multitudes out there who are struggling daily to hide their brokenness and vulnerability from others. This season of spiritual discipline is an opportunity for us to sharpen our antennae to pick up the signals emitted by these categories of the “poor” who are unable to stretch out their hands and plead for our help but who nevertheless are crying silently in their hearts for assistance.

10. At the institutional level, it might be useful to draw attention to how we can also live this exhortation of St John, to “love in deed and in truth”.

Let us be reminded that charity (Caritas) is an integral part of the life of the Church, for without it she is defective and incomplete. To this end, at both the universal and local levels, She has always had in place organs dedicated to the promotion of her caritative works. At the universal level, *Caritas Internationalis* is the body responsible for co-ordinating all the various bodies within the ambit of the Church who are working in this area. *Caritas Africa* coordinates the same work at the African continental level and each Country has an office under the auspices of the Bishops Conferences which does the same at the national level. In Ghana, it is the *Department of Human Development* at the National Catholic Secretariat that coordinates the caritative works of the Church in Ghana and is in effect our *Caritas Ghana*.

At the local Church level, it is the *Development Offices* of the various dioceses which appropriately coordinate the caritative works of the individual dioceses, hence serve as our *Diocesan Caritas* offices.

11. In the light of the above, we miss the point completely when we consider our Development Offices as purely NGOs or humanitarian works. These Diocesan Caritas offices constitute the Local Churches’ response to all those **who stretch out their hands and plead for help and solidarity**. They are an expression of Jesus’ preferential love for the poor. In our efforts to improve the lives of people around us, particularly in the area of education, health, livelihood and peace-building we are doing so in the spirit of the gospel and in imitation of Christ himself, who came that they may have life and have it in fulness”.(Jn 10,10). In this regard, it is also an opportunity for those of us lay, priests and religious who are directly involved in the work of our Diocesan Caritas to reflect on the spirit and quality of our service delivery. There is no honour and privilege comparable to the honour of serving those who have the courage to **stretch out their hands and plead for help and solidarity**.

12. Finally, let us also endeavour during this season to revive and renew our various *Parish Caritas*. Just like the universal Church, charity (Caritas) is an integral part of the life of the parish and any parish that falls short in this area is equally defective and

incomplete. Let our parish charitable organs and associations be open and sensitive to those members of the society who stretch out their hands and plead for help.

13. Through the intercession of our Mother Mary whose maternal heart is so sensitive to those in need and suffer want (cf Jn 2), may we be moved, especially during this season of Lent, to truly love in truth and in deed.

Wishing you all a fruitful Lenten season and with the assurance of my prayers for a joyful Easter,

Most Rev. Alfred Agyenta
(Catholic Bishop, Navrongo-Bolgatanga Diocese)

cc. All Parishes, Rectorates, Chaplaincies, Religious Houses