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The Holy Father's Message for Lent 1991

What You Do To Others, Do To Me

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This year we celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the great Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum, which opened a new chapter in the Church's social teaching. A constant factor in this teaching has been its untiring appeal for solidarity in working to overcome the poverty and underdevelopment in which millions of human beings live.

Although Creation and its goods are meant for all, a large part of humanity today still suffers under an intolerable burden of poverty. As I stated in the Encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, this situation calls for charity and a lived solidarity. There is an urgent need to work for the good of others and to be ready to lose oneself — in the Gospel sense — in order to serve others, instead of using them for one's own advantage.

1. During Lent we turn once again to the God of all compassion, the source of all goodness, and ask Him to heal our selfishness and to grant us a new heart and a new spirit.

Lent, and the Easter season which follows it, call us to reflect on the total identification of our Lord Jesus Christ with the poor. The Son of God, Who became poor out of love for us, became one with those who suffer. This total identification finds its clearest expression

in the Lord's own words: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

2. As Lent draws to its culmination on Holy Thursday, the Liturgy recalls the institution of the Eucharist, the memorial of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection. This Sacrament, in which the Church celebrates the depth of her faith, should lead us to become ever more profoundly aware of the poverty, suffering and persecution which Christ endured. The same Jesus Who loved us so much that He gave his life for us, and Who even now gives Himself to us in the Eucharist as the food of eternal life, asks us to see Him in the lives of the poor with whom He manifested His total solidarity.

St. John Chrysostom grasped this identification very well when he stated: "Do you want to honour Christ's body? Then do not scorn him in his nakedness, nor honour him here in the church with silken garments while neglecting him outside where he is cold and naked" (cf. Hom in Matthaem, No. 50, 3-4, PG 58).

3. In this Lenten season we would do well to reflect on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Everyone is called to share in the banquet of life, and yet today so many people lie outside the door, like Lazarus, while the dogs come and lick their sores (cf. Lk 16:21).

To ignore the immense multitudes of human beings who are not only deprived of the absolute necessities of life (food, housing and medical assistance), but who do not even have the hope of a better future, is to become like the rich man who pretended not to see the beggar Lazarus (cf. Lk 16:19-31).

We must never lose sight of the heart-rending misery that afflicts so many parts of the world. With this in mind I repeat the appeal which I made in the name of Jesus Christ and on behalf of all mankind during my last visit to the Sahel Region of Africa: "How would history judge a generation which had all the means to feed the population of the planet, and yet with fratricidal indifference would refuse to do so? . . . Would a world in which poverty fails to encounter life-giving love not be a desert?" (L'Osservatore Romano, 31 January 1990, p. 6).

As we look at Jesus Christ, the Good Samaritan, we cannot forget that from the poverty of the manger to the total abandonment of the Cross, He chose to become one with the "least". Christ teaches us detachment from riches, trust in God and readiness to share, He urges us to look at our brothers and sisters who are poor and suffering from the point of view of one who — in poverty — knows what it is to be totally dependent upon God and to stand in absolute

need of him. The way we live will thus be the true and authentic measure of our love of Him Who is the source of life and love, as well as the sign of our faithfulness to the Gospel which He preached. May this Lenten season heighten this awareness in all of us and increase our commitment to charity. May it not pass by fruitlessly, but rather carry us, truly renewed, to the joy of Easter.

From the Vatican, 8 September 1990, Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

— John Paul II
