

Lenten Letter from Bishop Willie Walsh

Dear Friend,

Lent is the most challenging time in the Church Year. During Lent we are called on to muster up courage and face our own sins. I will not even suggest areas you might look at in this regard because you know your sin just as I know mine. This Lent, let us judge no one but ourselves when it comes to sin. In this way we are making a very authentic Lenten journey.

*My offences truly I know them
My sin is always before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned;
What is evil in your sight I have done.*

Psalm 50 is a recurring Psalm in the prayer of the Church. Its themes of sin and repentance make it lean towards the gloomy side. As a result, it is rarely promoted to any great extent. It puts it up to us to acknowledge sin and the role of personal sin in particular. Maybe, that is why it sits uncomfortably with us. It is easier to point to public sin and the sins of others than it is to face up to personal sin.

Despite the painful reality of sin that it portrays, the Psalm also presents much that is about the compassion and forgiveness of God. Above all, it is a prayer that seeks forgiveness as we turn to God in our abject failure and unworthiness.

*Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness.
In your compassion blot out my offence.
O wash me more and more from my guilt
And cleanse me from my sin.*

Any reflection on this Psalm would open one's eyes to the current issues of the day and how they can be interpreted in terms of sin. Not to acknowledge the fall-out from the recent Murphy and Ryan Reports would be a blinkered interpretation of the Psalm in question. As a bishop I find myself having to examine my

conscience in regard to my approach to the instances of all forms of abuse as highlighted by these two reports.

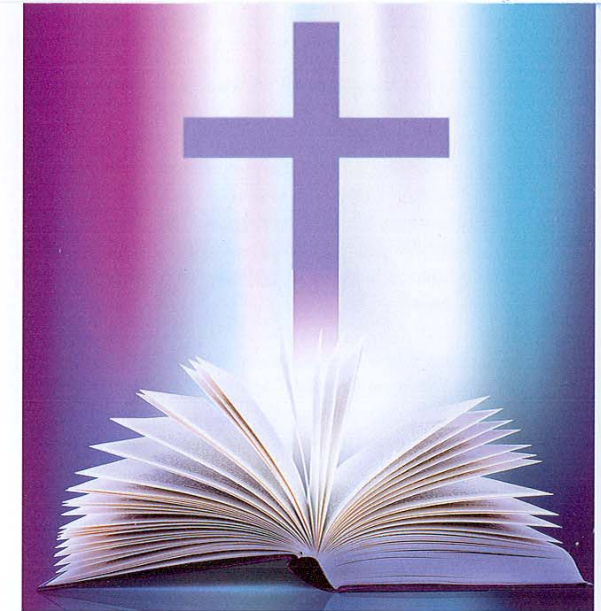
There are four steps we take in dealing with sin:

- Acknowledgement of sin. It might be called: owning my sin.
- An act of sorrow in the form of apology.
- The actual seeking of and asking for forgiveness.
- The fourth step of making amends or offering some form of compensation as a means of testing the genuineness of one's repentance. It is called: doing penance.

It is indeed a humbling experience for the Catholic bishops to have to admit their share of guilt for the abuses as catalogued in the two reports. It requires courage and honesty to walk the humble path and it may take us far longer to *do so* than to say so.

*Indeed you love truth in the heart;
Then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom.
O purify me, then I shall be clean;
O wash me, I shall be whiter than snow.*

Words prove terribly inadequate when it comes to dealing with the content of these Reports. One senses that words are irrelevant just now and that people are too angry and upset to tolerate more words. I am acutely aware that in the wake of the Dublin (Murphy) Report, bishops have experienced opprobrium at a level they have never experienced before in this country. As I said, I find it humbling and shaming and I have reflected deeply on it in an effort to learn from this experience. It has brought me to my knees and made the words of Psalm 50 speak to me with an intensity I have never felt before.



*Make me hear rejoicing and gladness,
that the bones you have crushed may thrill.
From my sins turn away your face
And blot out all my guilt.*

Please do not construe my words as a plea for sympathy when I say that a bishop finds it difficult to address his flock at this time in our country. A gulf has been created between bishops and laity in the aftermath of the Dublin report. One commentator put it succinctly by saying:

Those (bishops) who could be expected to live by the values of the gospel, and to teach others, seemed to have strayed from it, while those (laity) who had been taught had absorbed in a striking way the gospel message.¹

It is as simple as that: the preacher not practising what he preaches. Such is the failure of leadership that has disillusioned, angered and alienated many of the most loyal members of the Catholic Church in our country. I speak to you now in this Lenten Pastoral in this spirit of humility and repentance. You too have been sinned against and I express my sorrow to you.

*A pure heart create for me, O God,
put a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
Nor deprive me of your holy spirit.*

¹ *Spirituality*, Dec./Jan. 2009 /10, Dominican Publications, www.dominicanpublications.com

I am coming towards the end of my time as a serving bishop. I have reflected on the pain, confusion and hurt felt by so many in our country at this time. As a former teacher of mathematics, there are those who would say that I like to solve problems. It could be suggested that I must be very disappointed to be retiring at this time when there are so many jagged edges in the Irish Church.

Experience has taught me that life is not a problem to be solved according to a set of ready to hand mathematical solutions. Life is a mix of joy and sorrow. There are many elements of surprise at directions taken and choices made. For every smooth path there is a rough passage. The jagged edges are a reality that must be accepted and examined for the lessons to be learned there.

*Give me again the joy of your help;
with a spirit of fervour sustain me,
that I may teach transgressors your ways
and sinners may return to you.*

There is Hope for all of us. I see possibilities of growth and genuine renewal for the Catholic Church in Ireland. It is a growth that will take place over time as green shoots emerge slowly from a well pruned branch. It will be a Church where laity will be listened to and their views put into practice. Church leadership will learn through its pain to be more compassionate and lead people in a spirit of truth and honesty. The love of God will be our guiding light and inspiration.

The commentator I have already quoted above has this to say in regard to the future:

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Church in Ireland will never be the same again. It is now time for deep reflection, for a major overhaul of how the church works in practice, of how bishops are appointed. What is urgently needed is a return to the values of the gospel - values like compassion, honesty, integrity and truth, to say nothing of love.²

I would add this: that the laity in the Church have a great strength and an opportunity to show (in

² Ibid.

time) a generosity that will save the Church. I speak of the grace of forgiveness. All sinners desire forgiveness. It is part of our Lenten goal to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation at Easter time. We also need to seek forgiveness from one another. It is when the Church has done its penance of change and renewal that the time will be right for forgiveness. When that time comes may you be moved to forgive in God's Name.

*For in sacrifice you take no delight,
burnt offering from me you would refuse,
my sacrifice, a contrite spirit.
A humbled, contrite heart you will not spurn.*

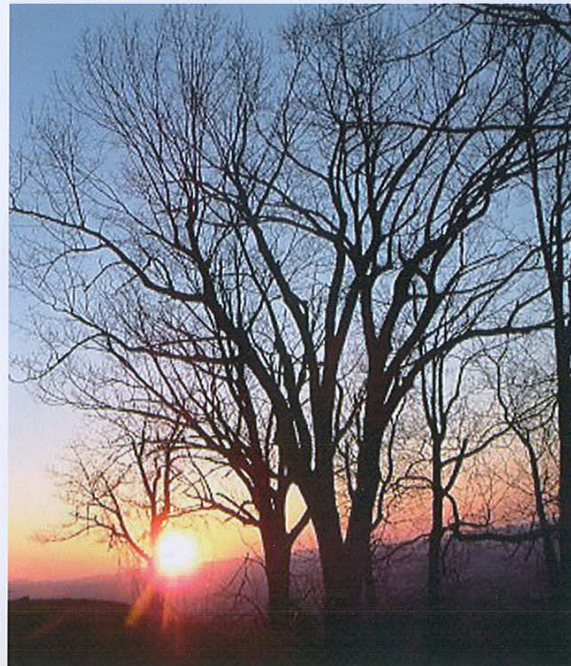
*In your goodness, show favour to Sion:
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem*

In conclusion, I want to thank you for allowing me share this Lenten Reflection with you. I wish you a Lent of personal spiritual renewal and the joy of the Risen Christ this Easter.

Let us pray for one another.

Yours sincerely,

+ Willie Walsh

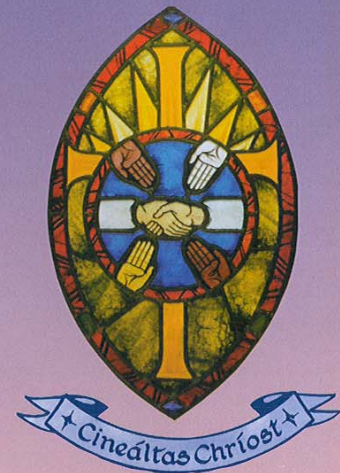


PASTORAL LETTER

from
Bishop Willie Walsh

A Reflection For Our Time

Based on Psalm 50



Killaloe Diocese

Lent 2010