2007 Lenten Message
The Most Reverend Richard G. Lennon, Bishop, Diocese of Cleveland

‘Repent and believe in the Gospel’

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

As we prepare for the season of Lent let us pause and consider what the church is calling us to do. On Ash Wednesday we will hear the words "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." These words summarize a two-fold aspect to our journey--turning away from sin and turning to a deeper relationship with Jesus. For it is Christ himself, through his passion, death and resurrection who has set us free. May our Lenten practices of prayer, penance, almsgiving and acts of charity lead us to the fullness of life in the resurrection of Jesus Christ this Easter.

Let me share a few thoughts about penance for penance is at the heart of the Lenten journey and at the core of Christian life. For the followers of Jesus penance is critical for two principal reasons. Penance likens us to the suffering servant, Jesus Christ who, motivated by love, laid down all claims to his divinity, was stripped of his dignity by sinful humanity, and suffered for our sins and those of the whole world. Through our grace-filled practice of penance and self-denial we draw near to our suffering Savior, the light of the world.

The church teaches us that penance is a means by which we may be freed from the power and influence of the dictates of the flesh, our passions, our self-centeredness, our self-indulgence and general attachment to the things of earth so that our hearts may be centered on the things of heaven.

We learn from athletes, scholars, musicians and others who perform great feats of human accomplishment that their lives are lives of discipline, training and dedication. Without these ingredients they would never reach great accomplishment. The practice of penance, if performed with sincerity and faith, assists the believer in building up the strength of will, the detachment from self, and the freedom that is required to live for and in Jesus Christ. Through penance we are set free and empowered to set aside everything else and pick up the burdensome cross of Christ, and live our lives for him.

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"Repentance and conversion" are the way that the Scriptures and the church understand this turning away from self in detachment from this world and the turning toward Christ with freedom and affection. Repentance and conversion are expressed in the single Greek word ‘metanoia,' which means a ‘change of heart.' The believer, through acts of penance, along with prayer, almsgiving and acts of charity, turns away from the illusory promises that this world has to offer and, turns his or her sights upon the face of Christ and embraces the One who suffered for our salvation. The late beloved Pope John Paul II said it so beautifully: "May we look upon the face of Christ."

As with all things on the journey of faith, the message of repentance and conversion is contained most perfectly expressed in the Holy Eucharist. In the daily celebration of the Mass we are reminded of God's gift of salvation and His call to holiness. This is the most perfect action of turning from all that separates us from Jesus Christ and the turning toward all that is perfect in the love of Christ Jesus: detachment from what distracts us and attachment to who saves us and the world.

This Lent I invite all of the Christian faithful within our diocese to join with one another and with me in sincere and holy acts of penance for our sins and the sins of the whole world. Our practice of penance cannot be that of the hypocrite--merely material and external observance while lacking the spiritual dimension of repentance and conversion. Let's assist one another by offering a powerful and communal witness of attending Mass more often and more faithfully, observing faithfully the laws of fasting and abstinence as the church proposes them, and by individual acts of penance appropriate to each person's situation. In these ways we may gracefully turn away from the obsessive consumerism of our culture to a more meaningful life in Christ.

May these 40 days be a time of true conversion, a turning about for all of us in the Church of Cleveland. May the Holy Spirit guide our penance, thereby conforming us more closely to the likeness of Christ. Also, please pray for our catechumens and candidates for full initiation as they draw near to the Easter Vigil. May God's blessing enrich your lives this Lent so that your relationship with the Lord Jesus will be deeper than when the journey began on Ash Wednesday.