

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

God is about to do something in *your* life! It doesn't matter if you are 7 or 77 years old - God is about to do something in your life. It doesn't matter if you are a regular church goer or if you only come 3 or 4 times a year - God is about to do something in your life. It doesn't matter who you are: perhaps you are a mom or a dad, busy with a thousand things to do and 10,000 things to worry about; perhaps you are a youngster in the third grade; you might be one of the high school students who stand at the back of the church at Sunday Mass; maybe you're retired; perhaps you live alone; you may be a young single adult; you might be a junior in high school on the basketball team; you might be happy or sad, tired or rested; perhaps you are engaged to be married or you may have been recently widowed; maybe you have forgotten about God, or perhaps you think that God has forgotten about you. You might be angry at the church, you might disagree with the church or you might be the church's biggest fan. All that matters is that God is about to do something in your life!

Have you any idea, any thoughts or notion of how God wants to touch your life this Ash Wednesday and in the forty days of Lent that follow? **Do not doubt** for a moment that God wants and waits to touch your life in the holy season ahead of us. As a matter of fact, not a day goes by without the Lord reaching out to touch us, to speak to us, to forgive us, to heal us, to comfort and challenge us. *Lent is a time* when we make an extra effort, for 40 days, to listen for God's word, to ask for his mercy, to open ourselves to his healing touch, and to invite the Lord to enter more deeply into our hearts and lives. At least for a season, we make a special effort to be open to God - and you can be sure that God will be ready to take advantage of our seasonal readiness! *Lent is a time* to do some spring-cleaning in the many rooms of our hearts and ready them for celebrating God's gracious presence at Easter.

Return to me, says the Lord, and I will return to you... Zechariah 1:3

This is an important time of the year for any of us who have turned away from God through sin or plain old laziness. God is waiting to meet us as we make our way home to him - he will go more than half the way to welcome us into the arms of his mercy and love. This is also an important time for any of us who feel distanced from God or even abandoned by him. God never leaves our side, although there are times when our pain and problems blur our vision of his presence. *Lent is a time* to reach out in faith, again, and to know that the Lord is beside us, behind us, before us, over us, under us and within us! *Lent is a time* to come home to the Lord and to his people: a time to be forgiven and a time to be welcomed at the table of his presence in the holiest of all communions.

No one is without the need to "return to the Lord." Every one of us drifts daily from God's word and love, needing always to rechart our course. Every one of us is in need of God's forgiveness for our faults and failings. Every one of us needs the healing touch of God's hand in our broken hearts, in our pain, in our problems, and in our anxieties. Every one of us needs a Lenten refresher course in how to live the Christian life. Lent is the great "equalizer" in church life: in Lent, all stand equal before God as sinners in need of mercy; as brothers and sisters who have failed to love each other as God has loved us; and as hungry people in need of God's nourishment and help. No Christian is exempt from the season of Lent. Every one of us needs it and every one of us needs the support of the others in this holy time.

Returning to the Lord always involves turning away from sin. As you receive ashes on Ash Wednesday, you hear the words, "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel." Fidelity to the gospel is the best way to avoid sin. Listening to the Lord's word, asking him to help keep us on the path of his truth, and trusting in his strength to support us in our weakness - that's what Lent is really all about. *Lent is a time* to face our hearts in the right direction and to walk with the Lord as our companion along the way.

Teach us to care and not to care, teach us to sit still.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death... T. S. Eliot

It's fair to say, with the poet Eliot, that Lent is a season in which we learn, again, "to care and not to care." *Lent is a time* to learn again to care about the things that truly matter, that really make a difference in our lives. And *Lent is a time* to learn, again, not to care about those things that are passing, that have no real claim on us as children of God. To discern the difference, to know when to care and when not to care, we must ask the Lord to "teach us to sit still." Often it's our hurried life styles that blind us from seeing the wild goose chases we follow in pursuit of things that have little or no meaning, purpose or value. *Lent is a time* to learn to sit still and listen for God's word and voice in our hearts in prayer. *Lent is a time* to sit still and develop an awareness of everything we consume and to fast from those things that do not really nourish us. *Lent is a time* to sit still and take inventory of our lives: how we spend our time, our money, our love, our energy, our desires, and our selves. *Lent is a time* to reach into our pockets, purses and portfolios and share what we have with the poor - as generously as God shares his mercy with each of us.

Fasting is the soul of prayer... mercy is the lifeblood of fasting.

If we do not have all three together, we have nothing. St. Peter Chrysologus - 5th century

Prayer, fasting, and mercy on the poor are the three ancient and traditional "tools" of Lent. The emptiness of fasting frees us to pray; fasting and prayer teach us the difference between what we have and what we really need; caring for the poor is the harvest of prayer and fasting: it is the concrete evidence of our desire to grow in faith, in love, and in our knowledge of God. *Lent is a time* for *offering up* our hearts in prayer. *Lent is a time* for *giving up* the tastes, the things, and the time we desire for ourselves. *Lent is a time* for *opening up* our hearts and our treasured possessions to help the poor who want for even the most basic of human needs.

Lent is a time for Christians to do some *spring training!* It's time for us to get our flabby spiritual selves back in shape, as we prepare to celebrate Easter. Like any exercise program, the three Lenten exercises depend on one another to help us develop as fully as we need and as we can. Prayer, fasting and caring for the poor form a triad of exercise - ignore one and the other two will suffer. Ash Wednesday is the time to determine our Lenten exercise program and to pledge to be faithful to it.

But I just don't have time for all of this... Average American Catholic, 21st century

Lent is a time to learn again to make time for God in our lives. Every moment of our existence, every second of our time is a gift to us from God. *No time for Lent this year?* Then what do we have time for? Do we have time for a morning cup of coffee? for reading the paper? for calling friends? for watching the game on TV? for catching a favorite afternoon soap? for going to the mall? for reading the sports section? for going to the movies? for playing the lottery? for a late night snack? for surfing the 'net? for a few beers or a couple of drinks? for vegging out on the sofa and clicking through the cable channels? for trips to the video store? for team practice? for everything except homework? God wants to be part of our daily schedule: he's asking that we change our daily routine and make some time for him. (And you can be sure of this: the time we make for God in our lives is so often the best time we make for ourselves!) God has all the time in the world for us. How much of our day are we ready and willing to return to him with grateful hearts? This week includes **Ash Wednesday** and the beginning of our preparation for Easter. The bulletin includes the schedule of services for being signed with ashes and other Lenten opportunities. May your Lent be a holy one and lead you to Easter joy!

Sincerely,
Fr. Fleming