

NOTE: This letter was published in the February 23, 2017 edition of *The Catholic Spirit*, the official newspaper of the Diocese of Metuchen.



Bishop James Checchio

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Lent always seems to come around so quickly!

March 1 is Ash Wednesday already, and hence we begin our 40-day Lenten journey once again. In his annual message to the faithful this year, Pope Francis reminds us that, during Lent, we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience. At Mass on Ash Wednesday, in our first reading of the day, we will hear the prophet Joel

beckoning us to “return to the Lord with our whole heart.” Indeed, we return again on Ash Wednesday each year to put our whole heart before the Lord. As our foreheads are marked with the sign of the cross, we ask Him, throughout each of the 40 days ahead of us, to remake our hearts to be more like His own.

In his Lenten message released Feb. 7, the Pope encourages us to change our hearts, saying, “This season urgently calls us to conversion,” which will come about by “deepening our spiritual life through the means of sanctification offered us by the Church: fasting, prayer and almsgiving.”

The Holy Father spends the rest of his message exploring the central themes behind the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which he says, “Exhorts us to sincere conversion.” He begins with our need to recognize other persons as gifts. “Lazarus teaches us that other persons are a gift. A right relationship with people consists in gratefully recognizing their value. Even the poor person at the door of the rich is not a nuisance, but a summons to conversion and to change,” the Pope said. “Lent is a favorable season for opening the doors to all those in need and recognizing in them the face of Christ. Each of us meets people like this every day. Each life that we encounter is a gift deserving acceptance, respect and love.”

The disciplines of Lent – prayer, fasting and almsgiving – are meant, of course, to help us to stay focused on our baptismal promises. We do this through communicating regularly and intensely with our Beloved, exercising self-control so as to emphasize the supreme importance of the spiritual over the material in our lives, and sharing generously with those in need. These three disciplines help us to avoid the temptation to show indifference of God and our neighbor and they push us away from focusing too much on ourselves. Moreover, these three disciplines are intended to turn us towards God and others, especially our brothers and sisters most in need; they help our hearts to become more like our Lord’s.

Indeed, my brothers and sisters in Christ, as St. Paul reminds us in the second reading at Mass each Ash Wednesday, “Now is the acceptable time”. Yes, God calls us to conversion and beckons us to deepen our spiritual lives by deepening our friendship with Christ; so on Ash Wednesday we clearly hear our Lord say to each of us: “Believe! Return to me . . . turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.”

I pray that this Lent we will all join with the Holy Father in prayer, “May the Holy Spirit lead us on a true journey of conversion, so that we can rediscover the gift of God’s word, be purified of the sin that blinds us, and serve Christ present in our brothers and sisters in need.” God bless you all.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James F. Checchio". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Most Reverend James F. Checchio, JCD, MBA
Bishop of Metuchen