

PASTORAL LETTER FOR ASH WEDNESDAY
25 February 2009

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

*"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has
come near; repent, and believe in the good news."
(Mark 1:15)*

As we usher in the great season of Lent with the observance of Ash Wednesday, let us remind ourselves of our Savior's call for repentance and faith in the Good News. Let us see with greater clarity that Lent is a time when the Lord invites us towards true transformation, which is the rebirth of the heart in goodness and purity, a renewal of the spirit in truth and righteousness. May we take this time then to look within ourselves and to discern what changes we can perform in our thoughts, attitude, words, and actions so that we may truly allow the Holy Spirit of God, our eternal guide and companion in the way of Christ, to shape us more and more into the persons that He desires us to be.

In our prayers and reflections during these sacred days, let us consider the importance of practicing the great traditions that Holy Mother Church has passed on to us through the ages. These are the spiritual practices of *prayer, fasting and abstinence, good deeds and almsgiving*.

All these practices are holy, and they direct us towards becoming more like Christ in His self-forgetfulness for the sake of the poor, the lost, the destitute, and the hurting. Through prayer, we grow in our intimacy with the Lord. We come to hear Him more and become more sensitive to the movements of His Spirit. Through fasting and abstinence, we free ourselves more from the destructive attachments to pleasure and materialism which this present world have made into objects of obsession. Through good deeds and almsgiving, we unite ourselves with others in a common humanity and make ourselves more fully human, more Christian.

Of these practices, good deeds and almsgiving present themselves as acts that engender in us the virtues of generosity and compassion. They do so because ultimately they are actions that promote justice in our society. Whenever and wherever they are lived out, they enable people to share God's blessings more equitably, and make the goods of the earth available especially to those who are suffering because of poverty and its dire consequences – hunger and malnutrition.

In numerous occasions, Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI has told us that hunger and malnutrition are unacceptable and that people suffering from lack of

food must be helped so that they can gradually become capable of satisfying their own need for sufficient nourishment.

Hunger and malnutrition have taken their toll on our Filipino children. Recent surveys reveal that today three out of ten Filipino children, infants and toddlers alike, are suffering from chronic malnutrition. It is estimated that in Metro Manila alone close to one million children are physically and mentally underdeveloped because of hunger and malnutrition. They face the risk of permanent brain damage and even death.

We invite you then, fellow Christians, to live out a deeper meaning of Lent this year by performing acts of good deeds and almsgiving. These acts may be creatively joined with your practices of fasting and abstinence, such that the cost of food you forego and are able to save, be it 50 pesos or less, may be donated to feed hungry and malnourished Filipino children. One such program is the HAPAG-ASA.

HAPAG-ASA is an Integrated Nutrition Program meant to alleviate hunger among Filipino children. Through collaborating dioceses and organizations, it has fed 360,000 Filipino children nationwide in the past three years. This year, it is targeting another 120,000 children, of which 12,340 will be fed in the parishes of Archdiocese of Manila and its five suffragan Dioceses of Pasig, Quezon City, Paranaque, Novaliches and Caloocan where you belong.

We appeal to you to support HAPAG-ASA in its efforts to care for hungry and malnourished children of our parishes, 12,000 children out of a million hungry children in Metro Manila is not much. We need to do more and we can do more with your help. Your donation, no matter how small, will go a long way as it only costs a mere ten pesos a day or PhP 1,200 to feed a child once a day for six months. You can save the life of a Filipino child with PhP 1,200. Please ask your parish office for donation envelopes or ways you can be of help to the program. You can also help your parish start a Hapag-Asa program in your parish if it has not yet done so.

As we observe this great season of Lent, let us carry within us our Holy Father's words which he wrote in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: "Those who are in a position to help others will realize that, in doing so, they themselves receive help."

May your Lenten observance be meaningful and blessed. God be with you all!

Most Rev. Antonio R. Tobias, DD
Bishop