

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The season of Lent is upon us and once again the Church offers us the opportunity to share more fully in the Paschal Mystery – the dying and rising of Christ.

This is the journey we are called to undertake during Lent. Through prayer, fasting and almsgiving we are invited to become more Christ-like in our beliefs, our attitudes and our actions. Parishes offer us many opportunities for prayer: daily Mass, Stations of the Cross, Penitential Services, the special Day of Prayer and Fasting for Peace for the war-torn people of the Democratic Republic of Congo and of South Sudan called for by Pope Francis on the first Friday of Lent, 23 February, “*24 Hours for the Lord*” on 09-10 March, Gospel Sharing, Service to the Poor and other local activities.

Our main Diocesan event is the annual pilgrimage to the Kruisberg in Dysselsdorp on the first Sunday of Lent. All are encouraged to attend so that we as the local church may give collective witness to our unity in faith and support one another along the journey towards becoming more Christ-like. Our Bishops’ Conference invites us to participate in the Bishops’ Lenten Appeal which enables us to have a meaningful share in the activities of the Church throughout our region. Copies of the Bishops’ Lenten Appeal newsletter have been distributed to all our communities.

This newsletter also contains an introduction to the Lenten Programme on Racism. In the spirit of becoming more Christ-like the bishops of Southern Africa have proposed that Parish Pastoral Councils and other groups reflect on the experience of racism in our country. This is a sensitive issue and can stir up deep-seated emotions such as hurt, anger, fear, guilt and shame. These are wounds which we carry with us and Jesus wants to bring us healing. Unhealed wounds spill over into our current relationships. South Africa is a wounded nation as crime statistics and public displays of violence today give witness.

As Christian communities we are called to be safe places where all are accepted with empathy and understanding. Pope Francis’ famous image of the Church as a “field hospital” is relevant here. Lent provides us with an opportunity to examine our consciences to see if we are in any way ‘racist’ in our beliefs, attitudes and actions. Simply put, ‘racism’ is the belief that one race group is superior to another. This belief is contrary to our Catholic faith since we are all one in union with Christ and “there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female” (Galatians 3:28).

A recent survey found that approximately two-thirds of South Africans of all race groups said they have little or no trust in people of other race groups. This is the context in which the Lord invites to enter into this holy season of Lent. Through prayer, Bible sharing, reflecting on racism, fasting, almsgiving, confessing our sins, healing relationships, caring for others and respecting all creation may we filled with the compassion of Christ. “If we die with him we shall also live with him.” (2 Timothy 2:11).

May the healing, reconciliation and compassion of Christ be yours this Lent!

+ Francisco de Gouveia  
Diocese of Oudtshoorn