

28 February 2015

Ref. No. Priests/GR/38/2015

Dear Fathers,

Greetings in the Lord!

We have begun our Lenten journey: a journey calling us to experience conversion of our heart and closeness to the Father who invites us to return to him.

An Experience of the Wilderness

Wilderness is not a place where one settles down to live. You may travel through wilderness but you cannot and must not continue to live there. There you may wander through but it is not your destiny.

Wilderness and wandering experience is not uncommon in the Bible. Our first parents were driven out of Paradise into where nothing would grow except by toil and sweat (Gen 3:23, 24). Cain confessed his guilt saying that he would be hidden from the Lord's presence and will be a restless wanderer (Gen 4:14). Israelites were to offer their first fruits and tithes declaring before the Lord, "A wandering Aramean was my father..." Israelites themselves were wanderers in the wilderness and were wanderers not for forty days but forty years.

Lent is a beautiful time which calls us to realise where we are. It is not a call to go *into* wilderness in as much as to realise that it is where we already are. We are in wilderness. Do not settle down there. Make the decision right now to move on as did the prodigal son: "I will get up and go to my father (Lk 15:18).

Wilderness is not merely a lack of human habitation, lack of food, or means for living. It is emptiness, where God's presence is not there. Wilderness is when my soul stops perceiving the presence of God, stays on in a desert of ego, filled with brambles of selfishness, pride, lust, envy, gluttony, raging anger, covetousness, and sloth that craves comfort, security, and leisure.

Jesus too underwent this experience of wilderness. His temptations were not different from that of ours. He was a human being like any of us. But his victory was in his focus, in his goal, in his destiny. His conquest was when he overcame his wander, dissipation, disorientation, which were prompted both by his flesh and by the Devil. But Jesus was *led* by the Spirit.

Jesus' own desert experience we can understand as an inner journey. It was very much akin to that of Israel's journey in the desert. Jesus was driven into the wilderness immediately after his baptism. Mark says, "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12). Not that Jesus resisted the Spirit so he was 'driven,' but the urgency of mission required an "urgent cooperation" with the Spirit. Jesus' inner journey in the desert experience meant prioritizing prerogatives and bringing into perspective his life's goal, and strengthening the fidelity unto the one who called him.

Conversion and Confession

Israel began their journey after being freed from Egypt. They could have reached the Promised Land in much less than forty or fewer days. The distance was not much.

But the Israelites covered the distance in forty years. Exodus became a journey without destination. There was lack of faith in God who led them. They refused to be led by God. They were led by their own whims and desires.

Our season of Lent has fifty days and by all means all our lives need not be spent as Lent. Lent offers us opportunity to examine ourselves, primarily to know whether we are on the right track or we have missed the goal, examine our priorities and the status of our fidelity unto the one who has called us. But an unexamined, dissipated, disoriented life can indeed become an experience of desert of 40 years.

After his return from the desert, the first message of Jesus was: "Repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). Jesus' proclamation of this message was only after taking stock of his own situation of his fidelity to God, his Father.

These Lenten days we priests preach to our faithful the same message. It is good and true. In as much as John the Baptist and Jesus who came preaching conversion and the Gospel we too should do. But like John the Baptist and Jesus, we need to take stock of our own situation.

At the outset I need to go about changing my life before I can call for conversion. Who am I to ask my brother to take the speck out his eye when I have a log in my own eye (Mt 7:5)? Yes, of course, as a priest 'forever,' my task continues, calling for conversion and inviting people to believe in the Gospel. But as a person in flesh and blood, I too need to examine myself, take stock of my life.

How long since I have gone for confession? Have I accepted my sinfulness? Have I the habit of justifying my sins? What are my sins? How deep is my faith? How strong is my trust in God? Do I worship God alone or do I have other idols? Does charity and love define my relationships, or is it selfishness and pride? In what state is the language that I use - a hurting, judgemental language, vulgar or unrefined language? Do I read, see, speak things that are unhealthy or unbecoming of a priest? Do I pray the official prayers? Do I spend time in personal prayer? Do I read the Bible, update myself with theological material and magisterial teachings, or I satisfy myself with giving diluted worthless explanation of faith to our faithful? Am I faithful to my calling? Or have I missed the goal?

These days of Lent are not merely meant for our faithful and their conversion. We as priests need to seek the forgiveness of the loving Father who awaits our return. Fifty days are more than enough. Let us not make it forty years like the Israelites did. If we take these fifty days seriously, things can be set right within ourselves. Fifty days indeed is a time where we can make minimum of two confessions!

Dear Fathers, as we seek forgiveness and as we preach forgiveness let us make use of this beautiful sacrament of relationship, viz., Confession. We need to go for confession. We need to help people go for confession. One of the precious faculties given to us as priests is to forgive sins in the name of God with the power given to the Church. We are doctors of the soul who bring inner healing.

I recommend all of us to make ourselves available for this sacrament. *Though we are to be disposed anytime of the day to hear confessions, kindly fix a time and make known to the faithful when you can be available. The recommended time can be before the Holy Qurbana, inform the people to come a little early to make their confession and encourage*

them to go for confessions as often as they can. "What you receive freely, give freely" (Mt 10:8).

Some News

1. Inauguration of the Year of Consecrated Life

This year marks the 50th anniversary of *Perfectae Caritatis*, a decree on religious life, which speaks of renewal of religious life, and of *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council's constitution on the Church, which speaks of religious in its sixth chapter. Pope Francis announced that the current year be celebrated as the Year of Consecrated life and this coincides with the Jubilee year of proclamation of these Church documents. On 1 February 2015 we had the solemn inauguration of the Year of Consecrated Life (YCL) at the Sacred Heart Parish, Padanthalumoodu. At 2.00pm, there was Holy Qurbana presided over by me. It was followed by Cultural programme. Very Rev. Fr. Jose Muttathupadam, VG of Thuckalay, Very Rev. Fr. Solomon, VG of Kottar Diocese, Rev. Sr. Rose Francis DM, Provincial of the Daughters of Mary, Marthandam, and Rev. Fr. Wenceslaus OCD, President of CRI, Mulagumoodu were the other dignitaries present on the occasion. Several priests of the diocese, religious priests and sisters, and the faithful, all joined to celebrate this special occasion and inaugurate this YCL. The Theme of the YCL is 'Wake up the World.' Accordingly it was resolved that all of us in Church become agents of cohesion, and to preferentially serve the marginalized of the society.

I congratulate and thank Rev. Fr. Felix SDB and his team who meticulously planned and executed the events of the day and I also wish them effective animation programmes which they have planned for this year.

2. Holy Qurbana for Fr. Philip Kodianthara and the Home day at Minor seminary

Fr. Philip Kodianthara, former VG and the Administrator of the Thuckalay Diocese, was fondly remembered on his second death anniversary on 10th of February when all the priests gathered at Mukkoottukal to celebrate the Home Day and priest conference at our Minor Seminary. A Holy Qurbana was celebrated in Fr. Philip's memory. I take this opportunity to thank Rev. Fr. Tom Kunnumpuram the Rector for hosting the presbyterium at the seminary and for inviting us to join the Home day celebrations. I congratulate the staff and students of the seminary for taking care to organize and celebrate the day very well.

3. St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara and St. Evuprasiamma Thanksgiving celebrations

St. Kuriakose Elias Chavara was a spiritual leader and a social reformer. St. Evuprasiamma the praying mother inspired many with her saintly life. Our mother the Church recognized their heroic virtues and gifted them to us as models and intercessors. To thank God for their Canonization, recognition, and graces received through them, the dioceses of the three rites viz., Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, and Latin rites in the Kanyakumari district, took up to organizing a Holy Pilgrimage of the Relics from 15th February 2015 to 22nd February 2015. The pilgrimage covered several of the parishes of the different rites and culminated in Pilankalai, St. Therese of Child Jesus Forane Church with a Solemn Eucharistic Celebration presided over by me, and concelebrated with Most Rev. Peter Remigius, Bishop of Kottar Diocese, and Most. Rev. Vincent Mar Paulos, Bishop of Marthandam Diocese and several priests from all the three dioceses. Among the important dignitaries present were very Rev. Fr. Paul Achandy CMI, Prior General of the CMIs, very Rev. Sr. Sancta CMC, Mother General of the CMC, and provincials. About

4000 faithful participated in the beautifully arranged programme including felicitations at the end of the Holy Qurbana.

I thank Rev. Fr. Jose Muttathupadam, our VG, Rev. Fr. Luka Kollampampil CMI, and all the fathers, sisters, members of the faithful and the organizing team, who cooperated in making the day a memorable one.

4. Vocation promotion

The vocation camp for this year will be held in the month of May, from 10th to 15th. The number of missions which stand in need of priests are many. Kindly encourage as many probable candidates as possible to attend the vocation camp. I request all the fathers to prepare fitting candidates to priesthood and to religious life. Consider giving preference to altar boys and members of the Mission League.

A One-day Vocation Camp for girls towards entering religious life will be conducted on 17th May.

5. Orientation program

As we are involved in Pastoral work and evangelisation and various ministries in the diocese, it is always good to train our mind, widen our horizon and update our knowledge on relevant issues. In this regard an Orientation Program meant for all the priests of Marthandam and Thuckalay Dioceses will be held at MIDS, Kazhuvanthittai on 16th and 17th March 2015. The programme will begin at 9.00am and will end at 3.30pm on both days. Rev. Fr. George Plathottam SDB, the CBCI Social Communication Secretary will be the animator. He will deal with the theme Communication for Pastoral Leadership. *I ask you dear fathers to set aside these two days completely only for this Annual Orientation Program and be present without taking any exceptions.* On the second day we will also have a short Priest Conference. May I recommend the fathers who are going to colleges to take two days leave in order to attend this orientation program. Rev. Fr. Jose Muttathupadam our VG will contact you all in this regard.

6. Sanctification Day and Welcome to Most. Rev. Jerome Dhas Varuvel SDB

On 31st March, we all the priests and religious of the diocese will come together at Sangamam to thank God for the gift of Priesthood and religious life. Most Rev. Jerome Dhas SDB, the Bishop of Kuzhithurai diocese has consented to preach the recollection. It will also be an opportunity for us to welcome and felicitate the Bishop for being the first shepherd of the diocese of Kuzhithurai. This day is kept as sanctification day for us priests to thank and praise God for the gift of priesthood which was instituted on Holy Thursday. There will be concelebrated Holy Qurbana and Mooron. The day's programme will start at 9.30am and end at 3.30pm. We all will be spending this day fasting and prayer, however, those who require meals will have to inform the Director of Sangamam.

Information

1. We are very glad that our Diocese is blessed this year with 10 students who will go for their Philosophical Studies to Ujjain, Bangalore, and Warangal. We wish them all the best and assure them our continued support through our prayers.
2. Rev. Fr. George Maliekal SDB, the Salesian Provincial of Silchar Province will be visiting us on 3rd March. We welcome him wholeheartedly and wish him a pleasant stay with us. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his interest and concern for our diocese and for the support he gives us.

3. It is Exam time in all the schools. Our 10th and 12th students and others too will be writing their exams. Let us pray for all our students that they may perform well in their studies and exams.
4. Deacons have completed their special classes and diaconate ministry in their respective parishes. Now they have gone home to prepare for the for ordination day and for their retreat. We wish them a blessed time of preparation.
5. I along with our VG and Fr. Tom Kunnumpuram will meet the parents of our seven Deacons on March 2 at Changanassery Bishop's house.
6. We are very happy to receive from Germany, four young women and three young men, students who are on work experience to our diocese. They will arrive on March 14. We welcome them wholeheartedly to be with us and spend their valuable time with us and in our institutions.
7. The Vestition of Br. Abilash and Minor orders of Br. Vinu and Br. Jabanesh will be held on March 30, 2015 at 6.30 am in Sangamam.
8. The Diaconate Ordination will be held on Wednesday, April 1, at 5:30pm in Mankarai.
9. Rev. Fr. Jose Muttathupadam will visit our seminarians studying at Ujjain, Satna between 4th & 12th March.
10. This year's Lenten Collection will be given to Devasahayam Nalvazhvu Nilayam (DNN). Please distribute the *hundials* to the families and ask them to contribute generously.

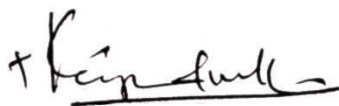
In Conclusion

We are preparing ourselves for the great feast of the Resurrection. At the end of this month we will be entering into the Holy Week remembering and celebrating the Lord's Passion and Death.

Death precedes Resurrection. Our bodies definitely will one day perish. But our faith says we will participate in the Resurrection of our Saviour. St. Paul declares, "all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death" (Rom 6:3). Even when living in our bodies, we are called to die. As disciples of the Lord, we are to take up our daily cross (Lk 9:23). Our old selves are to be crucified with the Lord (Rom 6:6). We are to live as those who have died to sin (Rom 6:2).

During this season of Lent, may I wish all of you dear fathers, a blessed time of spiritual journey with the Lord, into the desert, and also towards Jerusalem, where we will join with him in his Passion, Death and Resurrection.

Yours in Christ Jesus,



+ George Rajendran SDB
Bishop of Thuckalay