

3-1997

Letter: Lent 1997

Robert P. Maloney C.M.

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Recommended Citation

Maloney, Robert P. C.M. (1997) "Letter: Lent 1997," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 41: No. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol41/iss2/2>

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To the members of the Congregation of the Mission throughout the world

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

Even though we are only beginning Lent, today I ask you to leap with me to the resurrection. Not that we can skip the cross; on the contrary, it will be our companion throughout life. But I leap to Easter right from Lent's start so that we might view the cross with resurrection faith, as the New Testament always does.

At the center of our creed is the Risen Lord. When we abide in his presence, our lives are full. In his absence, they are empty. Without the Risen Lord, our faith (and of course our vocation) is meaningless. "If Christ is not risen," Paul tell us clearly, "your belief is in vain" (1 Cor 15:14).

Let me reflect with you today about two key aspects of our resurrection faith.

First, we believe that Jesus is *alive*. Our faith focuses on a living person. To paraphrase the psalmist, some fashion idols of silver or gold or power or pleasure. These have always been, and will continue to be, seductive. But we believe in the living Lord who loves us deeply, who walks with us daily, who listens to us, whom we can speak with in return, who gives us his life, his strength, his peace, his joy. We believe not merely in someone from the past who lived, died, and left us a rich heritage. Our faith is in the person of Jesus who overcame death once for all, who lives on, who abides among us, who prepares a place for us with God. We believe in the presence of the living Lord, who has become for us a life-giving spirit (1 Cor 15:45).

Secondly, we believe in the *flesh*. Have you ever noticed how much our faith as Catholics is connected with the flesh? Two of the articles of the creed speak very concretely about it. "By the power of the Holy Spirit he took flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary." Our faith in Jesus is precisely that he is the Word made flesh. We also pray in the creed, "We believe in the resurrection of the flesh and the life of the world to come" (when we will be with the Lord in the flesh!). The gospels tell us that Mary the Mother of Jesus was the first to believe in this striking mystery. She believed not only in the transcendent God of Israel, but in God's immanence in the flesh of her son.

I want to suggest to you two things this Lent.

1. First of all, use this Lenten time to focus on the presence of the Lord. In Lent we renew our baptismal commitment to renounce all "idols" and to give ourselves over completely to the following of Christ. As the New Testament describes it, this "following" is not the mere embracing of a rule book or a charter; rather, we join the

community of those who profess their faith in the living Lord. In the rich Lenten readings, he speaks his word to us. John and Paul both tell us that the word of God was present even from the beginning of creation (Jn 1:1-3; Col 1:15-16). So I encourage you to contemplate his presence. See him in the wonders of creation. Love him in the beauty of nature, in the majesty of the mountains, and in the stars at night. See him, now in the fullness of time, in the crucified and risen Lord. Let him take hold of your heart. Allow him to draw you into prayer in Lent. Let him teach you his wisdom and assure you of his love. The hour of personal prayer to which our Constitutions call us daily (C 47) is a wonderful opportunity for listening to the living Lord and for discerning what he is asking of us in this Lenten time.

2. At the same time, like Mary the Mother of Jesus, focus on the word made *flesh*. He still lives among us, especially in the person of the poor. The test of our faith is to see him in the flesh. The first letter of John sets out a high standard for Christians: "Whoever does not love a brother or sister whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he does not see" (1 Jn 4:20) _ because God lives in the flesh. Seeing him in the flesh is the Vincentian secret of holiness. St. Vincent encourages us to recognize him and serve him in the most abandoned with practical, concrete charity. He urges us to be simple and humble before the poor person because he is the icon of the Lord, the body of Christ, the enfleshment of Jesus' presence today.

In some ways, at least it seems to me, it is more difficult to believe in God's enfleshment than in his transcendence. It is easier to believe in a God whom we do not see than in a God whom we do see. It is easier to be caught up in a distant mystery than to come face to face with the revelation of God in human persons, especially when they suffer and die before our eyes. It is surely a challenge to see the Lord in the crucified peoples of Rwanda, Burundi, Algeria, Zaire, Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria, China _ to mention only a few of the countries where he suffers greatly in his members today. In almost all our countries, it is a daily challenge to recognize him in street people, in refugees, in AIDS victims, in disillusioned young people. "But turn the medal," St. Vincent says to us, "and you will see by the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is represented to us by these creatures...." (SV XI, 32). This was also the same challenge Mary faced. Her contact with Jesus had numerous joys and privileged moments, as we recalled at Christmas. But she also witnessed his rejection, punishment, and dying _ and continued to believe. I urge you to share your faith in the enfleshed Lord this Lent by encouraging others _ especially young people _ to serve him in his suffering members. Let our Vincentian charism be contagious!

I wish you a Lent, my brothers, in which the waters of a renewed baptism refresh your heart and in which the Lord's presence is your strength.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General