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Letter for Lent

Robert P. Maloney C.M.

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To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear confreres,

May the peace of the Lord be with you in this lent en season.

There must be some daring in the following of Christ. Without risks, Christianity becomes bland. "If anyone wants to come after me," Jesus proclaims, "let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mk 8:34). Martyrs, celibates, monks, missionaries --- all remind us that love of the Lord engenders daring dreams.

Lent is a time of daring resolution. It speaks of a fundamental risk. In lent we pledge our free, loving participation in the passion of Christ. We say *yes* to the journey to Jerusalem. We renew the commitment made at baptism to die with Christ in the hope of the resurrection. Historically, lent has always been a moment of radical decisions: when catechumens stepped forward to follow Christ; when Christians chose to do penance for their sins; when penitents undertook the long fast.

May I ask you to dare this lent? This challenge does not come merely from me; it echoes the New Testament. The letter to the Hebrews sings the praises of a long series of risk-takers, from Abel to the martyrs and other heroes in the early days of the Church --- "the world was not worthy of them" (Heb 11:38) ---, and it urges us, surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, to fix our eyes on Jesus who risked the cross in the hope of the resurrection.

I suggest that we be daring, among other things, in regard to the traditional lenten works. These works are intimately bound together in that they all aim to set us free. The proper practice of each demands attention to the others. By them, "we empty ourselves in order to put on Jesus Christ," as St. Vincent loved to say to the Company (SV XI, 343; cf. Rom 13:14).

1. *Fasting*. Christian fasting evokes longing for the Lord's return. Through it we experience hunger, emptiness, yearning for the great heavenly feast. As we fast, we bow down before the Lord, recognizing that he alone is our fullness. Isaiah reminds us that true fasting also involves "setting the captive free, breaking every yoke, sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless, clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own" (58:6-7). These are intrinsically linked with fasting because a longing for the Lord and his kingdom drives us to do the works of justice. Do many of us fast today? We know, of course, that cutting back on the consumption of tobacco, alcohol, and some kinds of food can have obvious health advantages. Do we dare to reach out for these benefits? Even

beyond that, could we risk real fasting this lent, being satisfied with simple fare and giving the proceeds to the poor, as St. Augustine (cf. Sermon 208) and so many others since him have suggested.

2. *Almsgiving.* There is a strange paradox in Christianity. We believe, with the author of Genesis, that the material things God has created are good; yet Jesus warns us not to let them weigh us down. Missionaries especially must be free, unencumbered, ready to go wherever the Lord sends them. Our goods are instruments in reaching out to others, especially the poor, rather than buffers that insulate us from them. Are there material things that hold me back? Can I use my goods more socially, as ways of embodying my love and service? The lenten call is quite stark: "Go, sell what you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me" (Mt 19:21). May I ask that we all be daring in this regard too? Is there a generous gift I can give that will be an effective sign to the poor that the kingdom of God is at hand? Is there a special project that you as an individual, or your house, your mission team, your parish, or your province might undertake as lenten "alms" to the oppressed?

3. *Prayer.* Both fasting and almsgiving flow from and lead to prayer. Dare to pray more intensely this lent. You may, if your experience is anything like mine, find inner resistance to this suggestion: are not there "more important" things to do? am I not often "wasting time" distractedly when I pray? But the initial lenten gospel (Mt 4:1-11) tells us that before Jesus begins to preach, he prays; before he mingles with the crowds, he enters into solitude; before he seeks out the sick and sinful, he contemplates the face of his Father. Since your schedule is probably already full, I suspect that your saying *yes* to more intense prayer in lent will necessarily mean that you risk saying *no* to something else. What is it that I must set aside in order to pray more this lent?

Sometimes, timidly, we merely sip of life. Lent encourages us to drink a deep draught. "Can you drink the cup that I will drink?" (Mk 10:38), Jesus asks. His cup is deep, filled with risks, but transforming. From it flow strange signs, like martyrdom, simplicity of life, solidarity with the poor, celibacy, community, missionary zeal. When we drink it, we begin to die, but we also begin to live a new kind of life.

With you, I ask the Lord to bless the Company, that we might all dare to live lent fully.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General