

Lenten Letter 2021 of Archbishop Dr. Heiner Koch

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Archdiocese of Berlin,

The gospel of the first Sunday of Lent speaks of Jesus remaining in the desert, and for many of us the past eleven months may have been something like that, a walk through the desert.

In these days of the Corona pandemic one question repeated itself in many different ways: What will the consequences of this crisis be? Where does it lead us?

– Many families live confined together in a narrow space. This fact may at times become very hard, almost unbearable. Tensions arise, bitterness, quarrels. How to go on from there? Will we be able to be reconciled again?

– Our children are deprived of experiences with which regular school life enriches them. Learning is not what it used to be. Will the lack of social learning leave an impact on their future social behaviour? Will they make up for what is lacking now?

– Many feel worried about the senior members of the family who frequently fail to understand why they are suddenly left without the usual regular visits. This affects their whole life and attitude. How can this wound be healed?

– Missing social contacts may easily advance an uncontrolled use of nicotine and alcohol, food and drink, gaming and on-line occupation. And then you may ask yourself: How will I ever get free from these habits?

– Self-employed and business people suffer badly from the situation when their enterprise has to remain closed for a long time. Customers are likely to withdraw and do their shopping in the internet. How will my business ever start running as before?

– In our parish, meetings have become impossible and any togetherness is practically out. Our choir, for example, is falling apart. How shall we ever again become a living community?

These questions show how many men and women live under great stress, often in manifold ways: Children in school and family; grown-ups in the family, in their jobs and communities; elderly people in their families and social contacts, their parish. How to go on? Where are we moving to?

Bewilderment, exhaustion and helplessness is what I feel in myself and encounter in many persons whom I meet.

In the testimonies about the history of our faith, in both the Old and New Testament, we hear of a great number of people who felt disturbed or overwhelmed by their mental confusion and helplessness, unable to look ahead and plan forward.

- Abraham, childless, growing old and seeing God's promises ("becoming father of a great nation") unfulfilled, had no prospects at all anymore, "he fell on his face and laughed" (Gen 17:17).
- Moses, aware of the immense power and might of Pharaoh, simply saw no way into a better future for his own people (Ex 9-11).
- Elijah, feeling abandoned and at the end of his possibilities, fled into the wilderness and asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life!" (1 Kg 19:3-8)
- Think of the disciples who went to Emmaus, on Easter Day, disappointed and depressed because all their hope was gone after Jesus had been killed on the cross.

Not knowing what next, standing in front of shattered plans, calculations and perspectives, that is the substance of Holy Saturday, the time between Good Friday and Easter. For us Christians, it is the extreme experience. Christ himself descended into the deepest abysmal distress into which a human being can fall. The Church found that this moment can only be honoured with silence, a day of calm with no liturgy at all. As eloquent as the gospels are when telling of his passion, death and burial, so reticent are they concerning the time between the Lord's funeral and his resurrection. Words become insufficient, here they fail to serve us. Holy Saturday is a day of zero speech, of total abandon, utter poverty. Even lamenting ceases.

In the Creed we profess our faith in Him "*who descended into hell*", hell being the summary for all our pain, disorientation, helplessness, the felt deserts of our lives. Jesus shares these darkneses with us, staying with us where we can see no further. He does not end our incapacity nor remove the darkness, but neither does he flee and leave us alone and abandoned. This suffering from a lack of perspective and from bearing exhaustion and powerlessness we experience as a heavy burden. But often it is a great help to cope with these difficult moments when we can hold on to the faith that even now "the Lord is with you", and when we may also maintain the hope that dear companions will help us shoulder the load, - without expecting that everything will at once be restored as we might wish. It is wholesome to know that God and friendly people will accompany us and share our dreary feelings and sentiments, so that anger and exhaustion, sadness and fears are not simply brushed under the carpet. What a huge blessing lies in the certitude that God is staying with us, even when the horizon remains hollow and empty. How

consoling it is to experience the support of good people on whom we can rely in bad times, confident that their faithfulness and reliability always survive unshaken.

The disturbed sad disciples on their way to Emmaus were totally unaware of the marvellous joy the day was about to bring them when they met this stranger on the road, the Risen Lord. Before it happened they had to cope with their frustration and disappointment. We too cannot escape enduring the Holy Saturdays of our lives, the sense of being lost in the desert of our personal and social circumstances. Easter Sunday morning occurs only after Holy Saturday.

Keeping our eyes fixed on these men who faced up to their desperate feeling “but we had hoped” may be a suitable means of finding our own way through these corona times, catching a glimpse of the Lord’s presence in the darkness before Easter morning. For this year’s time of Lent I wish you many new fruitful and profound experiences of life and faith.

Your

Dr. Heiner Koch
Archbishop of Berlin

Translation: Dietmar Lenfers