



LITURGICAL-PASTORAL GUIDELINES ON THE FAST AND PRAYER FOR PEACE

IN PREPARATION FOR THE ASSISI MEETING OF 24
JANUARY 2002

After the grievous terrorist attacks in the United States of America on 11 September, the Holy Father has on a number of occasions deplored such violence and expressed his concern for the consequences of the military action taking place in Afghanistan. The Church prays and invites everyone to ensure that love will prevail over hatred, peace over war, truth over falsehood, and forgiveness over revenge.

More than two months after the attacks of 11 September, the situation remains serious, tension is very high, and people everywhere are still greatly distressed. For this reason, at the *Angelus* Prayer of 18 November 2001 His Holiness asked that "for Catholics 14 December be a day of fasting, during which they should pray fervently that God will grant the world a stable peace, based upon justice".¹ He added that it was his intention "to invite representatives of the religions of the world to come to Assisi on 24 January 2002 in order to pray for an end to hostilities and the advancement of true peace".²

Responding to this pastoral initiative by the Holy Father, this Note seeks to offer some thoughts on Christian fasting (14 December 2001), as well as on aspects of the Prayer Vigil of 23 January and the Pilgrimage of Prayer of 24 January 2002). Some practical suggestions are also given as to how these days might best be benefited from.

1. CHRISTIAN FASTING

1.1 *The Essence of Christian Fasting*

Fasting has an important place in all the great religions. The Old Testament lists fasting among the corner-stones of the spirituality of Israel: "Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving and justice" (*Tob* 12:8).³ Fasting implies an attitude of faith, humility and complete dependence upon God. Fasting is used to prepare to meet God (cf. *Ex* 34:28; *1 Kgs* 19:8; *Dan* 9:3); to prepare for a difficult task (cf. *Jgs* 20:26; *Es* 4:16) or to seek pardon for an offence (cf. *1 Kgs* 21:27); to express grief in the wake of domestic or national misfortune (cf. *1 Sam* 7:6; *2 Sam* 1:12; *Bar* 1:5). Fasting, inseparable from prayer and justice, is directed above all to conversion of heart, without which – as the Prophets declared (cf. *Is* 58:2-11; *Jer* 14:12; *Zech* 7:5-14) – it is meaningless.

Before beginning his public mission, Jesus, driven by the Holy Spirit, fasted for forty days as an expression of his trusting abandonment to the Father's saving plan (cf. *Mt* 4:1-4). He gave precise instructions to his disciples that their fasting should never be tainted by ostentation and hypocrisy (cf. *Mt* 6:16-18).

Following the biblical tradition, the Fathers held fasting in high esteem. In their view, the practice of fasting made the faithful ready for nourishment of another kind: the food of the Word of God (cf. *Mt* 4:4) and of fulfilment of the Father's will (cf. *Jn* 4:34). Fasting is closely

connected to prayer, it strengthens virtue, inspires mercy, implores divine assistance and leads to conversion of heart. It is in this double sense – imploring the grace of the Almighty and profound inner conversion – that we are called to accept Pope John Paul II's invitation to fast on 14 December. For without the Lord's help it will not be possible to find a solution to the tragic situation now facing the world, and it is hard to see how terrorism will be tackled at its roots without a conversion of hearts.

The practice of fasting looks to the past, present and future: to *the past*, as a recognition of offences committed against God and others; to *the present*, in order that we may learn to open our eyes to others and to the world around us; to *the future*, in order that we may open our hearts to the realities of God and, by the gift of divine mercy, renew the bond of communion with all people and with the whole of creation, accepting the responsibility which each of us has in history.

1.2 Pastoral Suggestions

1.2.1 It is the task of the Bishop or his equivalent in Canon Law:

– to inform all the members of the particular Church over which he presides of the Holy Father's request to promote *a day of fasting*, and to explain its meaning, with the help of his various co-workers in the areas of liturgy, ecumenism, charitable works, and justice and peace;

– to assess whether it may be appropriate in his particular Church to extend to members of other Christian confessions and the followers of other religions the invitation which the Holy Father, out of respect, addressed only to Catholics. It should be remembered that 14 December coincides with the end of the month of Ramadan, which the followers of Islam devote to fasting;

– to ensure that the fast is conducted with the discretion urged on us by Jesus, and that it is directed above all to obtaining the gift of peace and conversion of heart;

– to encourage, either on 14 December or a date near to it, a serious examination of conscience on the Christian commitment to the cause of peace. Christians have always firmly believed with the Apostle Paul that "Christ is our peace" (*Eph 2:14*); but while it is true that peace bears the name of Jesus Christ, it has also been true throughout history that his followers have not always borne witness to our final destiny which is communion around the throne of the Lamb: the divisions among Christians are a scandal and a genuine counter-witness.

1.2.2. The "day of fasting" should be understood not just in terms of the legal norms set down in the Code of Canon Law (CIC 1249-1253; CCEO 882-883), but in a wider sense which freely involves all the faithful: children, who willingly make sacrifices to help other poor children; young people, who are especially sensitive to the cause of justice and peace; all adults, excluding the sick but including the elderly.

Local tradition will suggest the best form of fasting to adopt: eating only one meal, or taking only "bread and water", or waiting until sundown before eating.

1.2.3. It will also be the responsibility of the Bishop to determine a simple and effective way of placing whatever is saved through fasting at the disposal of the poor, "especially those who at present are suffering the consequences of terrorism and war".⁴

2. PILGRIMAGE AND PRAYER

2.1. *The meaning of pilgrimage and prayer*

In the Hebrew Scriptures conversion means above all returning with all one's heart to the Lord and walking once more in his paths. Consequently, in accordance with tradition and the Holy Father's proposal, the fast and conversion of 14 December 2001 should be accompanied by pilgrimage and prayer.

The Church sees many Christian values in *pilgrimage*. In the Holy Father's proposal, and in spiritual preparation for the Assisi meeting, pilgrimage becomes a sign of the demanding journey which each of Christ's followers is called to undertake in order to attain conversion. It is an opportunity to consider once more in the silence of our hearts the path of history; to recall that we are indeed going towards the Lord "not by our footsteps but by our love, and God will be all the closer to our hearts the purer is the love drawing us towards him [...]. Not by our feet, then, but by the goodness of our lives can we go towards him, who is everywhere present";⁵ and to realize anew that every man and woman, made in God's image, is walking with us towards a single destiny: the Kingdom.

Prayer is the central moment in which to listen to God and fill the "void" created in us by the purification of fasting and the silence of pilgrimage. The heart of each one of us in fact must be the starting-point for the building of peace: it is through the heart that God acts and judges, heals and saves. We must not forget: there can be no possibility of peace without prayer, in which we learn that "peace goes far beyond human efforts, especially in the present plight of the world, and therefore its source and realization is to be sought in that Reality which is beyond all of us".⁶

2.2 *Pastoral Guidelines*

2.2.1. For the *pilgrimage*, it is the responsibility of the Pastor of each particular Church:

- to highlight, with the help of Diocesan agencies, the value and significance of making a pilgrimage, as part of the immediate preparation for the multi-religious meeting in Assisi on 24 January 2002, to be presided over by the Holy Father.
- to indicate places to which the faithful may go on pilgrimage between 14 December 2001 and 24 January 2002, in order to implore from the Lord the gift of peace and the conversion of hearts;
- to organize, wherever possible and appropriate, a pilgrimage at the diocesan level, led by the Bishop himself.

2.2.2. For the *Vigil on 23 January*, the Bishop should:

- inform the Diocese about the meaning of the Vigil itself, as an *immediate* spiritual preparation for the Assisi meeting;
- organize at the diocesan level a Vigil at which he himself will preside, and issue invitations to the members of other Christian confessions. Likewise, if appropriate in the circumstances, he should invite the followers of other religions, while avoiding any risk of religious indifferentism;

- ensure that the Vigil, to be celebrated as far as possible in the evening, follows in substance the theme proposed for the Octave of Christian Unity ("In You is the Source of Life"). The Vigil should consist of a Celebration of the Word, at which biblical and Church readings, psalms and prayers, moments of silence and of song follow one another in a characteristically liturgical format;

- arrange for a similar Vigil to be held, if possible, in every parish and Religious community in the Diocese;

- encourage the faithful to follow the Assisi meeting through the communications media, in prayerful union with the Holy Father.

3. ADVENT–CHRISTMAS: A TIME OF PEACE

The period indicated by the Holy Father – 14 December 2001-24 January 2002 – coincides mostly with the Advent and Christmas season, a time in which Christ is repeatedly hailed as "the Prince of Peace" and "the King of Justice and Peace".

Without interfering with the unfolding of the liturgical cycle, it will be easy to follow the Holy Father's wishes and stress the theme of peace, universal peace, peace as the fruit of justice. In Christian churches throughout the world, in the stillness of Christmas night, the song of the Angels resounds: "Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth" (cf. *Lk 2:14*). Not without reason did Pope Paul VI decide that 1 January, the Octave of Christmas, should be celebrated as the World Day of Peace: a decision which, in view of the dramatic circumstances of the present hour and the timeliness of the Holy Father's message – "No Peace without Justice, No Justice without Forgiveness"– should be respected with special emphasis on 1 January 2002.

1 January is also the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, the Mother of him who "is our peace" (*Eph 2:14*). Christians rightly invoke her as the "Queen of Peace", and it is to her that the Holy Father has entrusted "these initiatives [...] asking her to sustain our efforts and those of all of humanity in the search for peace".⁷

¹ Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 21 November 2001, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*

³ For many centuries, the Roman Liturgy on Ash Wednesday at the start of Lent took as the Gospel reading Mk 6:1-6, 16-18, which presents Jesus' teaching on almsgiving (mercy), prayer and fasting, which are in fact inseparable. "These three things, prayer, fasting and mercy, are a single thing, each drawing life from the others. Fasting is the soul of prayer and mercy the life of fasting. Let no one divide them, because alone they do not survive" (Saint Peter Chrysologus, *Discourse 43*: PL 52, 320).

⁴ John Paul II, *Angelus* Address, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 21 November 2001, p. 1. "Let us give as alms whatever we save by fasting and abstaining from our usual fare" (Saint Augustine, *Homily 209, 2*: NBA XXX/1, p. 162).

⁵ Saint Augustine, *Letter 155, 4, 13*: NBA XXII, p. 574.

⁶ John Paul II, Concluding Address for the World Day of Prayer for Peace (27 October 1986), in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, IX/2*, p. 1267. [English OR translation].

⁷ John Paul II, *Angelus* Address, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 21 November 2001, p. 1.