

Cir. No.3/2024
02.03.2024

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My dear Sisters,

As we are in the sacred liturgical season of Lent, we are called to journey into the depths of our souls, to reflect on our relationship with God, with one another, and with the world around us. In this journey of introspection and renewal, you and the communities would certainly have planned many practices to be observed. In the paragraphs ahead I intend to share with you, snippets from Pope Francis's Lenten message and the insightful graces that I received during my annual retreat in Pune.

Pope Francis' Lenten Message:

Pope Francis has cantered his Lenten message for 2024 on the Book of Exodus, choosing "Through the Desert God Leads Us to Freedom" as its main theme, to encourage the faithful to experience this season as a journey from bondage to spiritual renewal and freedom. In line with this communitarian aspect, the Holy Father relates it to the Church's "synodal form," which the Church is "rediscovering and cultivating." To quote him verbatim, "I invite every Christian community to do just this: to offer its members moments set aside to rethink their lifestyles, times to examine their presence in society, and the contribution they make to its betterment." This call for reflection and personal conversion is consistent with "Laudato Si" in which Pope Francis emphasized the moral and ethical imperative for protecting the environment and caring for the Earth, which he sees as integral to the well-being of humanity and future generations.

Insightful Graces of a Retreat:

The reason I mention "Laudato Si" is because nature can become such a powerful means for us to deepen ourselves spiritually. In my personal prayer I felt the Lord's invitation to rest awhile and I took time off to go on a spiritual journey guided by Sr. Lira Morais. It was an interesting accompaniment of a spiritual journey that led to a deeper reflection on God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit through the metaphor of a Tree. Nature for many of us is inviting and we love to spend time walking alone and sitting maybe by a stream. There was no



water body around but I was certainly blessed to have many trees and some pleasant weather there at Pune. It was both refreshing and relaxing. Everyday Sr Lira would lead me to discover God in scripture and to reflect on the life of a tree in relation to the Three persons: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. She took me through the different aspects

of a tree: roots; sap; stem; branches and finally flowers and fruits.

I began by taking a walk and chose the tree that drew me. I was particularly struck when one day I was reflecting on “Roots.” The father is the root, the Son Jesus is the stem and the Holy Spirit is the flowers and fruits that burst forth. If we look at the roots, they create space for themselves to grow even if we humans have decorated our campuses with interlocking tiles. They manoeuvre through it all and find place to spread their roots and overcome the challenges that come their way. I was confronted with this image that made me go deeper to look back at life with this question; “Am I totally grounded in the roots and am I conscious at all times that I am sent and spring forth from God the Father and the Son and the Spirit?”

In John 15:5, Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches.” In the book *Jesus is the Tree of life* by Yvonne Carol Freeman she says: “All trees which generate oxygen and bear abundant fruit have strong and sturdy roots anchored deep beneath the visible earth. A foundation so secure that the birds build their nests amidst the leaves on the branches high above the ground. We have a calling to build our life on a secure foundation that won’t crumble when we are faced with challenging situations. Let us build our house on a rock - that rock is Jesus Christ. We sometimes are like withering leaves that dry up once separated from the vines and branches torn from the trees.” If not anchored in faith and rooted in our charism we are tossed about blowing here and there when we encounter the storms of life. Jesus is the tree of life, the source in which I breathe, move and have my existence in this universe.

The Upcoming Holy Week:

As I travel across the country, in the midst of winter's quiet embrace, we witness the barren trees, stripped of their leaves, awaiting the promise of spring. Like these trees, during the most sacred time in the liturgical calendar, that is the Holy Week, we are invited to shed the burdens and distractions that weigh heavy on our hearts, to let go of that which separates us from God's grace. As the earth lies dormant, preparing for the awakening of new life, so too are we called to cultivate the soil of our souls, to make space for the seeds of repentance and reconciliation to take root and flourish. Let us embrace the Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and going outside our comfort zones, as acts of spiritual tilling, nurturing the soil of our hearts for the growth of God's love within us.

Maundy Thursday:

Let us be present at the Garden of Gethsemane. Why did Jesus choose a garden? It was because Jesus always moved away to a quiet private place to pray and connect with the Father. Besides, the garden of Gethsemane was familiar to Jesus and his disciples, as they had often spent some time together there (John 18:2). I imagine Jesus telling his disciples some inspiring stories, answering their questions, and praying with them as they breathed in the cool evening breeze, surrounded by beautiful flowers and fruit trees. However, this night was like no other – in just a few hours, a place of solitude would become a place of agony, and Jesus knew it. In the past few days, I have pondered on the events that took place in this beautiful garden before and during Jesus’ arrest.

Good Friday:

Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the salvation of the world.

The cross is invoked powerfully and poignantly when the priest prays the Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation, which we hear so often during Lent. As the prayer puts it, Christ's arms were "outstretched between heaven and earth to become a lasting sign of your covenant." We are reminded this day that it is a covenant that was sealed with nails, and splinters, and blood. In the reading tonight from Isaiah, the prophet tells us about the suffering servant – foreshadowing Christ. Isaiah tells us: "He grew up like a sapling before him, like a shoot from the parched earth...it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured." In Christ's cross, the wood we venerate and touch, we see a part of the shoot from the parched earth. Nailed to this cross, he became one with it – and we are able to see this wood for what it truly is: a tree, that holds out hope. Christ truly is the Tree of Life.

From within the four walls of our brokenness, behind the barbed wire of sin, we look out and look up and we see this "tree" that served to bring about our salvation. This is how we know we are saved. This is how we know how much God loves us.

Holy Saturday:

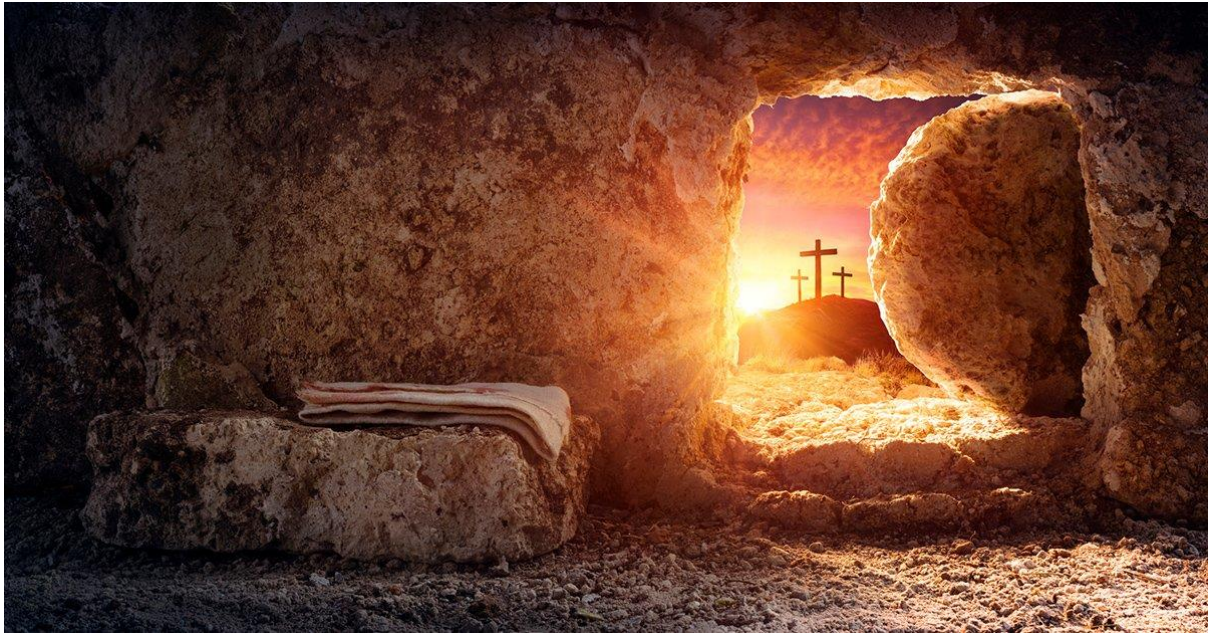
Here I would like to quote Scott Hahn an American Catholic Theologian "Something strange is happening – there is a great silence on the earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled on Friday and is now still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh, and he is about to be raised up and raise all of us to eternal life. God calls us to be part of this new creation in waiting and nowhere is this invitation more clear than Holy Saturday ... in the moments between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. On Holy Saturday the world waited, breath held, at the crossroad of the material and immaterial - suffering and joy. But are we in such a rush to move from the anguish of the crucifixion to the joy of Easter that the gift of Holy Saturday becomes invisible? Do we replace waiting with constant busy-ness?

It is good to spend time sitting at the tomb the darkness within, just as the seed needs to face the warmth of the sun and for the sap to spring to new life. Re-center your imagination and breathe deeply. You are at the mouth of the tomb just after the stone was rolled into place and darkness engulfed the space. Look deeply into the rocks and ground that was carved away to make this space. What do you see?

Conclusion:

In the gentle arrival of spring and the emergence of tender shoots, we glimpse the promise of the resurrection, the hope of new beginnings. Let us journey through these days of Lent with hearts open to the transforming power of God's grace, trusting that through the darkness of the cross, we will emerge into the radiant light of Easter morning. As we walk this path of spiritual pilgrimage, may we find solace and strength in the beauty of God's creation, in the song of birds returning from distant lands, in the delicate blossoms that adorn the earth with their fleeting glory. Let us learn from the wisdom of the natural world, where each season carries its own lessons of patience, resilience, and renewal.

Let us strive to be stewards of God's creation, to care for the fragile balance of ecosystems, to protect the beauty and diversity of life entrusted to our care. In this Lenten season, may our hearts be open to the cries of the earth and the cries of the poor, as we seek justice, mercy, and compassion for all God's creatures.



Dear Sisters, as we journey through Lent together, may we be inspired by the sacred rhythms of nature, by the cycles of growth and decay, by the promise of resurrection woven into the fabric of creation. May our Lenten observance be a testament to our longing for God's kingdom, a journey of hope, transformation and freedom guided by the light of Christ's love.

May God bless you abundantly as you embrace the Lenten journey with courage and grace.

My team and I wish you a Blessed Easter!

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Superior General