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## PASTORAL LETTER FOR LENT 2012

### THE EXILE

Dear brothers and sisters,

Once again, it is the time of Lent. The culmination of Lent is the suffering, death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. These events are very relevant for our lives and during the coming forty days, we need to reflect upon them and prepare ourselves, not only through prayer, but also by pondering upon their relevance in our lives.

#### **The Exile of the people of Israel**

This year, together with you, we propose a reflection upon the Greek word 'diaspora'. Do not be apprehensive about this foreign word! We shall explain its meaning.

This word means 'exile'. It is indicative of the time when the Jews lived in exile, far away from their homeland. This occurred twice in the history of the Jewish people.

The first exile occurred in Egypt. This story began when Jacob and his children left their home for Egypt, because there was famine; and ended around 1280 BC, when God, through Moses led the people out of Egypt. Thus, the Jews returned to the Holy Land. This story is recounted in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy.

In the second instance, the entire people of Israel were exiled in Babylon, during the sixth century before Christ. They spent 50 years there and returned at the time of the Persian reign in 537BC.

These two accounts narrate moments of great suffering, yet they were also moments of great joy. In both cases, there were occasions which contributed towards raising the hopes of the people that they would one day return to their homeland.

To begin with, they used to come together to weep over their plight. This is apparent when we read Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept as we remembered Zion... How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? If I forget you Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill!" (vv 1,4,5). These words reflect the great longing of the people that they may one day return to the Promised Land.

Secondly, even during the time of the Exile, God continued to communicate his Word to the people as a means of guidance. Without it, they would have had no direction. After God led the

Israelites out of Egypt, the people chose him to lead them, so he gave them his commandments. Can you just imagine the kind of nation they would be had they obeyed these commandments!

As God led the people out of the Exile in Babylon, they discovered the Word of God anew and they rejoiced because it was an instrument of direction for them: "Ezra opened the book ...the people all stood up and responded "Amen! Amen! Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord...For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law". (see Neh 8, 5-9). Now the people felt protected because the blessing of the Word of God came upon them.

### **The Exile of Jesus**

When Jesus came among us, he too experienced an inner 'exile'.

We can see this from the first chapter of the Gospel according to St John: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (1, 10-11). Even Jesus, who came for our salvation, had to pass through the predicament of exile; as a human, separated from the Father, and rejected by the very same people whom he came to save.

Jesus experienced this on the Cross: as a human, he was separated from God the Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Mt 27,46). At that moment, he also felt exiled from his own people, who crucified him. In the midst of all this sorrow, we can comprehend better those episodes when Jesus tried to draw closer to God the Father through his moments of prayer. Even when Jesus was at the point of death, we can see how hard he prayed to return to his Father now that his mission had been accomplished: "Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit" (Lk 23,46).

We can also understand why Jesus, before embarking on his mission of announcing the Good News, chose the Apostles and other disciples to live in communion with him. He felt joyful when he was surrounded by those apostles whom he had chosen: he spoke to them about the Father and about the path which leads us to Him. One indication that he wanted us to live in a community is that he never preached alone: he did so when surrounded by the apostles, his beloved ones. Jesus selected his disciples before he embarked upon his mission, and his mission was brought to fruition within this small circle, where he felt at ease sharing his thoughts.

### **Our Exile**

We too are called to live our faith in the light of this Exile.

We are saying this because unless we realize that we are passing through an Exile, then we cannot experience the change we mentioned in our Pastoral Letter for Advent. The period of Lent is a opportune time to take this encounter into consideration.

Jesus spoke about putting new wine into new wineskins (Mt 9,17). We are new wineskins when we live in expectance of our liberation from Exile in terms of our daily lives. In this way we attain the freedom to become receptive to the teachings of Jesus.

According to St Paul, we are “no longer foreigners and strangers but fellow citizens with God’s people” (Eph 2, 19). God created us for eternity, and the Christian should aspire to enjoy God in all eternity. Unfortunately, we no longer speak very much about this, however it is fundamental for our spiritual journey. If we acknowledge that we are in exile, we will not be very much attached to things of the world; rather we will focus upon those things which lead us to eternal life.

### **The Exile in the context of our culture and the time of Lent**

The exile embodies all that which draws us away from God. Everybody experiences exile in a personal way, but we can offer some examples: When we are under the impression that whatever we decide is right or wrong without considering our decision in the light of the Word of God; when we feel that in our life we have no need for Jesus or the Church which he bequeathed to us, except in times of emergency (illness, death, problems); when we become totally consumed by materialism to such an extent that we ignore ethical principles and measures of justice. In general, we may say that we are in a spiritual exile when we set aside God’s commandments.

Scripture tells us that in times of exile, the chosen people became conscious of the fact that instead of enjoying freedom, being distance from God and His commandments, they were enslaved by their own passions and desires and by those of others. In our contemporary world, there are many people who feel this way. They think that if they push God aside they will be freer to pursue their own inclinations. In fact, they realize that this is not the case. Often in such a miserable state, they wake up to the fact that they need God and they turn to Him once again.

Lent is the time when we choose to focus on the Kingdom promised to us by Jesus. During Lent, we should centre our thoughts on the Paschal Mystery – the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Lent becomes more meaningful if we choose a path that leads us out of our exile: more time spent in prayer; restraint from purely material things (this includes fasting from anything which tends towards materialism); reading the Word of God which illustrates the way to the promised land; the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) which helps us to discern better what is right and what is wrong in our lives; closer communion with the Sacrament of the Eucharist. All these are indicative of the fact that the person is not only trying to renounce his exile but it is also a sign that he is initiating his journey along a path that will lead him to ponder more deeply the mystery of living as a Christian.

We offer you this as a challenge.

We impart upon you our Apostolic Blessing.

✠ **PAUL CREMONA O.P.**  
**Archbishop of Malta**

✠ **MARIO GRECH**  
**Bishop of Gozo**