

**Ash Wednesday  
February 14, 2018**

“Lent summons us, and enables us, to come back to the Lord wholeheartedly and in every aspect of our life.” These are the words of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, in his Lenten Message this year. Our Lenten journey is not leading us just anywhere, it should lead us back to the Lord. Our journey should help us do what God has asked us through the Prophet Joel: “Return to me with your whole heart.” But Pope Francis reminds us that sometimes we are misled by “false prophets” who distract us from our goal of true and fruitful conversion. As the Pope says, “they can appear as ‘snake charmers’, who manipulate human emotions in order to enslave others and lead them where they would have them go.” Let’s take some time and look at some of these false prophets that try and lead us along the wrong path.

We are warned against following the “dream of wealth, which only makes [us] slaves to profit and petty interests.” Money is a tool in life, not an end in itself. The economy is not a measure of human success and flourishing. Money is necessary in our society, this is certain, but too many mistake their bank balance for their personal worth.

Pope Francis warns against the “charlatans” who offer simple but ultimately useless solutions to life’s pressures. He calls back all who are trapped by drugs, by “disposable relationships”, and by “easy but dishonest gains.” He urges change for those who “are ensnared in a thoroughly ‘virtual’ existence, in which relationships appear quick and straightforward, only to prove meaningless. These swindlers, in peddling things that have no real value, rob people of all that is most precious: dignity, freedom and the ability to love.”

We do not have to be afraid of these false prophets, my sisters and brothers. We just have to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and he will lead us through the desert to a deeper relationship with him. He is the one that called us on this journey to begin with! He loves us, and he has given us the Lenten Season specifically to walk with us through the conversion of our hearts, our minds, our souls, our relationships, and our lives. He also gives us tools to help us along the journey.

Our loving God has given us the sacraments. Go to reconciliation, my friends. If you go regularly, take a friend with you during this blessed season. If you have not been in a while, then this is God's message to you today: the time has come to go to the sacrament of forgiveness and mercy! That is what waits for you in confession. Attend Mass very regularly during Lent – daily if you can. Make the sacrifice of time! Conversion in Christ is supposed to take effort. Reject the false prophet of ease or comfort – seek the Lord with everything that you are, there is nothing more important you can do in a day.

We also have the great disciplines of Lent we receive from the Gospel: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These are crucial. During lent *make* the time to deepen your prayer every day. It will not happen automatically. Fasting helps us to see the world as it is. Go beyond the fasting and abstinence of Ash Wednesday and Lenten Fridays, and let fasting open your eyes and hearts to God's will. Finally, we have almsgiving. This one is probably the least utilized. In the United States, we have a twisted relationship with money and possessions. Don't be afraid to sacrifice some of the things you would normally buy and give that money to those who have less than you do. How we care for the poor flows out of our love for God, and the two are connected. Scripture is filled with this message, and

**Lent is a time to renew our commitment to the poor and marginalized among us.**

**With these tools to help us, we will keep our eyes fixed on the Lord during our journey through the wilderness of Lent, my friends. Do not be afraid of the challenges, because we do not face them alone. God is with us, and the Church is with us. All these wonderful brothers and sisters here are with us. We are united as a Church and walk in the power of the Holy Spirit! May we make this journey together, and draw closer to the God who loves us.**