

I. LENTEN MESSAGE - 2018

With Ash Wednesday, which falls this year on the 14th of February, we begin the holy and grace-filled season of Lent. For this year I would like to give below the Lenten Message of His Holiness Pope Francis.

“Because of the increase of iniquity, the love of many will grow cold” (Mt 24:12)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Once again, the Pasch of the Lord draws near! In our preparation for Easter, God in his providence offers us each year the season of Lent as a “sacramental sign of our conversion”. Lent summons us, and enables us, to come back to the Lord wholeheartedly and in every aspect of our life.

With this message, I would like again this year to help the entire Church experience this time of grace anew, with joy and in truth. I will take my cue from the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: “Because of the increase of iniquity, the love of many will grow cold” (24:12).

These words appear in Christ’s preaching about the end of time. They were spoken in Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, where the Lord’s passion would begin. In reply to a question of the disciples, Jesus foretells a great tribulation and describes a situation in which the community of believers might well find itself: amid great trials, false prophets would lead people astray and the love that is the core of the Gospel would grow cold in the hearts of many.

False prophets

Let us listen to the Gospel passage and try to understand the guise such false prophets can assume. They can appear as “snake charmers”, who manipulate human emotions in order to enslave others and lead them where they would have them go. How many of God’s children are mesmerized by momentary pleasures, mistaking them for true happiness! How many men and women live entranced by the dream of wealth, which only makes them slaves to profit and petty interests! How many go through life believing that they are sufficient unto themselves, and end up entrapped by loneliness!

False prophets can also be “charlatans”, who offer easy and immediate solutions to suffering that soon prove utterly useless. How many young people are taken in by the panacea of drugs, of disposable relationships, of easy but dishonest gains! How many more 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. They appeal to our vanity, our trust in appearances, but in the end they only make fools of us. Nor should we be surprised. In order to confound the human heart, the devil, who is “a liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8:44), has always presented evil as good, falsehood as truth. That is why each of us is called to peer into our heart to see if we are falling prey to the lies of these false prophets. We must learn to look closely, beneath the surface, and to recognize what leaves a good and lasting mark on our hearts, because it comes from God and is truly for our benefit.

A Cold Heart

In his description of hell, Dante Alighieri pictures the devil seated on a throne of ice, in frozen and loveless isolation. We might well ask ourselves how it happens that charity can turn cold within us. What are the signs that indicate that our love is beginning to cool?

More than anything else, what destroys charity is greed for money, “the root of all evil” (1 Tim 6:10). The rejection of God and his peace soon follows; we prefer our own desolation rather than the comfort found in his word and the sacraments. All this leads to violence against anyone we think is a threat to our own “certainties”: the unborn child, the elderly and infirm, the migrant, the alien among us, or our neighbour who does not live up to our expectations.

Creation itself becomes a silent witness to this cooling of charity. The earth is poisoned by refuse, discarded out of carelessness or for self-interest. The seas, themselves polluted, engulf the remains of countless shipwrecked victims of forced migration. The heavens, which in God’s plan, were created to sing his praises, are rent by engines raining down implements of death.

*Love can also grow cold in our own communities. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, I sought to describe the most evident signs of this lack of love: selfishness and spiritual sloth, sterile pessimism, the temptation to self-absorption, constant warring among ourselves, and the worldly mentality that makes us concerned only for appearances, and thus lessens our missionary zeal.*

What are we to do?

Perhaps we see, deep within ourselves and all about us, the signs I have just described. But the Church, our Mother and Teacher, along with the often bitter medicine of the truth, offers us in the Lenten season the soothing remedy of prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

*By devoting more time to **prayer**, we enable our hearts to root out our secret lies and forms of self-deception,⁵ and then to find the consolation God offers. He is our Father and he wants us to live life well.*

***Almsgiving** sets us free from greed and helps us to regard our neighbour as a brother or sister. What I possess is never mine alone. How I would like almsgiving to become a genuine style of life for each of us! How I would like us, as Christians, to follow the example of the Apostles and see in the sharing of our possessions a tangible witness of the communion that is ours in the Church! For this reason, I echo Saint Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians to take up a collection for the community of Jerusalem as something from which they themselves would benefit (cf. 2 Cor 8:10). This is all the more fitting during the Lenten season, when many groups take up collections to assist Churches and peoples in need. Yet I would also hope that, even in*

our daily encounters with those who beg for our assistance, we would see such requests as coming from God himself. When we give alms, we share in God's providential care for each of his children. If through me God helps someone today, will he not tomorrow provide for my own needs? For no one is more generous than God.

Fasting weakens our tendency to violence; it disarms us and becomes an important opportunity for growth. On the one hand, it allows us to experience what the destitute and the starving have to endure. On the other hand, it expresses our own spiritual hunger and thirst for life in God. Fasting wakes us up. It makes us more attentive to God and our neighbour. It revives our desire to obey God, who alone is capable of satisfying our hunger.

I would also like my invitation to extend beyond the bounds of the Catholic Church, and to reach all of you, men and women of good will, who are open to hearing God's voice. Perhaps, like ourselves, you are disturbed by the spread of iniquity in the world, you are concerned about the chill that paralyzes hearts and actions, and you see a weakening in our sense of being members of the one human family. Join us, then, in raising our plea to God, in fasting, and in offering whatever you can to our brothers and sisters in need!

The Fire of Easter

Above all, I urge the members of the Church to take up the Lenten journey with enthusiasm, sustained by almsgiving, fasting and prayer. If, at times, the flame of charity seems to die in our own hearts, know that this is never the case in the heart of God! He constantly gives us a chance to begin loving anew.

One such moment of grace will be, again this year, the "24 Hours for the Lord" initiative, which invites the entire Church community to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation in the context of Eucharistic adoration. In 2018, inspired by the words of Psalm 130:4, "With you is forgiveness", this will take place from Friday, 9 March to Saturday, 10 March. In each diocese, at least one church will remain open for twenty-four consecutive hours, offering an opportunity for both Eucharistic adoration and sacramental confession.

During the Easter Vigil, we will celebrate once more the moving rite of the lighting of the Easter candle. Drawn from the "new fire", this light will slowly overcome the darkness and illuminate the liturgical assembly. "May the light of Christ rising in glory dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds", and enable all of us to relive the experience of the disciples on the way to Emmaus. By listening to God's word and drawing nourishment from the table of the Eucharist, may our hearts be ever more ardent in faith, hope and love.

With affection and the promise of my prayers for all of you, I send you my blessing. Please do not forget to pray for me.

From the Vatican, 1 November 2017, Solemnity of All Saints

Franciscus

(N.B. I have informed the Parish Priests of Balasore, KC Pur, Joda and Hatigarh to comply with the instruction of the Holy Father for the reconciliation programme, given above, on the 9th and 10th of March in their parishes. Other Parishes are also welcome to have the same on those days).

II. THE 33RD PLENARY MEETING OF THE CBCI

Once again the Catholic Bishops of India gathered for its General Body meeting at St. John's National Academy of Health Sciences, Bangalore, from 2nd to 9th February. The theme chosen for the Assembly was “**United in Diversity for a Mission of Mercy and Witness**”. The CBCI is a supra-ritual body and hence matters of common interest were taken up for input sessions, deliberations and discussions. Seen from our view point our country is going through certain serious issues, of which all of us are aware. Those points were taken up for discussions. In all we were 184 Bishops present for the Plenary, well organized and planned well in advance. (I have given the final statement of the Assembly at the end of this Circular).

During the course of the meeting elections were held for the office holders of the CBCI.

NEW CBCI OFFICE HOLDERS

President: His Eminence Oswald Cardinal Gracias

Vice-President I: Bp. Joshua Mar Ignathios (Mavelikara)

Vice-President II : Abp. Mar George Njaralakatt (Tellicherry)

Secretary General: Bp. Theodore Mascarenhas SFX (Auxiliary, Ranchi)

NEW CHAIRMEN OF THE CBCI OFFICES

Doctrine: Abp. Thomas Mar Koorilos (Thiruvalla)

Clergy and Religious: Abp. Anil J. T. Couto (Delhi)

Dialogue and Ecumenism: Abp. Mar Joseph Perumthottam (Changanassery)

Education and Culture: Abp. Thomas D'Souza (Calcutta)

Health Care: Abp. Prakash Mallavarapu (Visakhapatnam)

Labour: Bp. Alex Vadakumthala (Kannur)

Justice, Peace and Development: Bp. Gerald Almeida (Lucknow)

Scheduled Castes / Backward Classes: Bp. Sarat Chandra Nayak (Berhampur)

Tribal Affairs: Bp. Vincent Barwa (Simdega)

Social Communications: Bp. Salvadore Lobo (Baruipur)

Archbishop John Barwa, SVD, of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, is one of the four bishops elected to participate in the forthcoming Synod of Bishops in Rome.

III. VOCATION PROMOTION

I would like to remind all of you about the need to promote vocations for the Diocese. Though primarily priestly and religious vocations are to be nurtured in the families, the Parish Priests have a great role to play in it. So instead of leaving the job entirely to the appointed vocation promoters, the Parish Priests are requested to identify prospective candidates from your parishes and inform about them to the vocation promoters (eg. Fr. Roy), who will do the needful.

IV. LENTEN SPIRITUAL RETREATS

Lent is a grace-filled season because it provides opportunity for self-purification and *metanoia* or conversion. One effective and popular means of helping our people to attain it is by providing them opportunity to attend spiritual renewal retreats. I would request all parish priests to arrange such retreats during this holy Season, and thus bring about a renewal in the life of our people.

V. GOLDEN JUBILEE OF THE APOSTOLIC PREFECTURE

This year marks the Golden Jubilee of the establishment of the Apostolic Prefecture of Balasore 50 years ago (in 1968) with Msgr. Jacob Vadakkeveetil, C.M. as its head. He and his team of enthusiastic missionaries have worked zealously to lay the foundation for the Diocese which would be erected in course of time. Most of them have gone to their eternal reward. While we gratefully remember them, we hope to keep their missionary legacy alive. We will formally inaugurate the Jubilee Year during the feast of Mother Mary of Lourdes at Mitrapur on the 11th of this month. A prayer to be said in the parishes and communities will be printed and distributed. We hope to make the year meaningful before we conclude it on the feast of Christ the King, on the 25th of November, 2018.

VI. MY PROGRAMME

February

11	- Mitrapur	- Feast of BVM of Lourdes	
13	- Balasore	- Diocesan Consultors Meeting	
14	- Balasore	- Ash Wednesday	
15	- Kuruda	- Jyoti Hospital Programme (4 PM)	
17	- Ollada (BAM)	- Bible Sobha	
25	- Balasore	- Cathedral Parish, Pastoral Visit	
	- Nuapadhi	- Vikas Sadan Programme (3 pm)	-

March

02	- Berhampur	- OCBC Meeting	
03	- Gopalpur	- Vincentian Family Meeting	
12-17	- Mumbai	- CCBI Bishops' Symposium	
25	- Balasore	- Palm Sunday	
29-31	- Balasore	- Easter Triduum	

With Regards and Blessing

✠Simon Kaipuram, C.M.
Bishop of Balasore

**XXXIII GENERAL BODY MEETING
CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF INDIA (CBCI)
BENGALURU, FEBRUARY, 2 - 9, 2018**

***“United in Diversity for a Mission of Mercy and Witness:
'I am with you always, to the end of the age' ” (Mt 28:20)***

FINAL STATEMENT

PREAMBLE

The theme of our General Body Meeting immediately invites us to reflect on the mystery of the Trinity. The great mystery of the one God, united in three Persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is the foundation of our Christian faith.

We thank God for the unique nature of the Catholic Church in India who is blessed with three *sui iuris* Churches called to reflect in her life and mission the communion of the Holy Trinity.

Rooted in this vision, we, the 184 bishops of the Catholic Church in India gathered together for the 33rd General Body Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) at St. John's National Academy of Health Sciences, Bengaluru, from 02 to 09 February 2018, to pray and reflect upon the theme: “United in Diversity for a Mission of Mercy and Witness: ‘I am with you always, to the end of the age’ ” (Mt 28: 20) to deepen our understanding of our own identity and to enhance our contribution to nation-building. We, the Catholic Bishops of India felt reassured and strengthened by the words of our Lord: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). We have taken into account the final statement of the Catholic Council of India (CCI) which met from 17 to 19 November 2017.

The Mission of Jesus

Jesus, who came to unite and reconcile the whole of humankind into one family of God, is himself the good news. He presented God to people in the way he loved all, namely, in feeding the hungry, comforting the disturbed, promoting the dignity of the marginalized, healing the sick, giving hope to the hopeless, freedom to the captives, forgiveness to the sinners, justice to the poor and life to the dead.

The Church in India

The Church in India received the gift of faith through St. Thomas, the Apostle of Jesus. Our Christian faith was nourished and strengthened by the efforts of many great saints such as St. Francis Xavier who is Patron Saint of Missions. We want to emphatically affirm that the Christian faith in India is as old as Christianity. India is what it is today is also due to the contribution of the Church in India.

With the evidence of yeoman service rendered by the Church, it is clear that India needs the Church just as the members of the Church continue to love India as they reach out to the very last and the least, in imitation of Jesus our Master. The Church believes that all people are our brothers and sisters as Jesus himself has taught us, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22: 39). The empowerment of the poor and the promotion of human dignity are values enshrined in our Constitution and are also cherished by the Church in her mission. The mission of the Church carried out through all her activities has only one aim, to build up our nation on the four essential pillars of peace, that is, truth, justice, love and freedom (cfr. St. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*).

Understanding Authentic Nationalism and Constitutional Secularism

Any attempt to promote nationalism based on any one particular culture or religion is a dangerous position. It may lead to uniformity but never to genuine unity. Such misconceived efforts can only lead our nation on the path of self-annihilation. Mono-culturalism has never been and can never be the right answer to the quest for peace, progress and development, especially in a country like ours that has a rich diversity of culture, language, region, race and religion. Violence always recoils upon the violent sooner or later, “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Mt 26: 52). We deplore the rising incidence of atrocities against women, killings, caste rivalries and communal violence which includes attacks on Christian institutions and communities. Therefore, let us follow

the path of true nationalism that can lead our motherland to true peace, harmony, progress and prosperity. Authentic nationalism respects the human dignity of every citizen, regardless of one's economic status, culture, religion, region or language.

We wish to urgently call all people of goodwill to uphold the rule of law guaranteed by our Indian Constitution. In a climate of violence, we make an appeal to all our fellow citizens to eschew mob culture and vigilantism in favor of peace. We appreciate and will collaborate with the Government in all its efforts to maintain law and order in our country, to ensure progress and development of all and the protection of the environment. The Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi has stated in clear terms that "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough of everyone's greed".

The Precious Gift of Human Life

The Christian community upholds the absolute and transcendent value of human life which is a precious gift of God. Therefore, an assault on human life can never be inspired by God nor justified because of the diverse beliefs and practices. Human life of every individual person in our beloved motherland needs to be valued and defended.

The Church's Mission of Mercy

Mercy that flows out of the heart of God alone, through the cross of Jesus Christ, can heal the wounded human hearts, restore the broken relationships between persons and communities and lift up out of misery those suppressed for centuries. Faced with this precarious situation we the disciples of Christ, resolve to be authentic witnesses of mercy, which is the essence of the Gospel and the manifestation of Christian discipleship. This is witnessed in the gentle hands and wrinkled face of St. Teresa of Kolkata and in the martyrdom of Bl. Rani Maria of Indore.

In our service to the nation, especially to the Dalits, Tribals and other backward classes, we Christians join hands with our fellow citizens to ensure the authentic human development of our people which is measured by the scale of human index, and not merely by economic standards.

Let us all resolve to go beyond narrow domestic walls of every kind in order to establish a truly secular, socialist and democratic nation as is enshrined in the Constitution of India.

To Live in Unity in the midst of Diversity, both within the Church and in the country, we propose the following:

1. To deepen and intensify our Christian life of discipleship at all levels by being a ceaselessly praying community, always living our unity in diversity in accordance with our Trinitarian faith.
2. To strengthen the bonds of communion among the laity, the religious and the clergy and to ensure that communion becomes the way of life for the Church at all levels.
3. To promote and intensify Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and Family Units for the all-round integral formation of the faithful and for inter-religious cooperation, peace and harmony.
4. To accompany families in their evangelizing mission in the world and to make sure that they become the focal point of the pastoral ministry of the Church; to manifest special care and compassion to families in distress and to enlighten our families on responsible parenthood.
5. To imbue our youth with the vision of an authentic Christian Life to enable them to play their role in Church and society; to empower our youth to play an active role in the Church by equipping them with the knowledge of the Word of God and with the teachings of the Church through the Indian Catholic Youth Movement (ICYM) and other Catholic Youth Movements; to help our youth to discern and choose the way of life which is the primary theme of the forthcoming Synod on Youth in Oct 2018.
6. To encourage and train our lay people and youth for nation-building through involvement in vitally important areas of our national life such as politics, civil services, defense, law and judiciary.
7. To ensure that formators in our formation houses guide the formees to respect the equal dignity of women and to promote the role of the laity in the life and mission of the Church.

8. To ensure adequate representation of women in all Church bodies.
9. To prepare seminarians, priests and religious to be authentic witnesses of mercy within the Church and society.
10. To seize every opportunity to promote dialogue across religious boundaries; our inter-religious dialogue will become more credible, fruitful and effective if we Christians make every effort to grow in our unity in Christ.
11. To take various initiatives to foster better cooperation among all Christians through dialogue with ecumenical groups and promoting common ecumenical services, common prayers and common endeavours.
12. To make the Constitution of India more widely known in all sectors of Church and society, particularly highlighting some salient features such as the equality of all citizens, the freedom of religion, the freedom of conscience and the freedom of expression.
13. To encourage and motivate our laity to be actively involved in the secular world in order to effectively contribute to nation-building in fulfillment of their proper vocation.
14. To continue to make our service in the field of education a mission of mercy and to implement purposefully the “All India Catholic Education Policy 2007” of the CBCI in order to impart Gospel values.
15. To make Catholic Health Services a mission of mercy and healing that is affordable, compassionate and caring, yet professional, self-sustaining and collaborative.
16. To ensure the implementation of the CBCI Policy of Dalit Empowerment in every diocese, to work for the protection and integral development of the Tribals and Other Backward Classes (OBC’s) and to take special initiatives for the relief and welfare of farmers, fisher folk, migrants and other deprived and exploited communities by providing care, comfort and hope to them in their distress.
17. To increase awareness of the importance of ecology as an integral part of our Christian commitment and spirituality and to take new initiatives to protect the environment and to promote love for Nature; to ensure that every diocese has formulated an environment policy to implement the teachings of *Laudato Si*, the Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis.
18. To create an awareness of the plight of our brothers and sisters in prison and to assist them in their rehabilitation and the care of their families.
19. To ensure transparency in all spheres of the Church’s administration and to stand for the same in society.
20. To set up an effective “think tank” for all our dioceses for taking up urgent matters and earnestly engaging in advocacy with all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The Church “exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God...” (Blessed Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 14). “The Church and theology exist to evangelize, and not be content with a desk-bound theology” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 133). Even as we face many grave challenges and setbacks to the unity in diversity of our country we are proud to be Indian. We love our country as we continue to pray constantly for it and its wellbeing. Our Christian faith gives us hope to move ahead to continue our work for unity in diversity so as to establish peace and harmony and make our country live up to its exalted calling. We entrust ourselves in all that we do for the Church and society, to the loving care of Mary, Mother of Mercy.

Baselios Cardinal Cleemis
President, Catholic Bishops Conference of India