

Diocesan Centre
Coursington Road
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Rt Rev. Joseph Toal STB KC*HS
Bishop of Motherwell

20th February 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I wish you all well. Thank you for your prayers and good wishes in recent times while I have been recuperating from hip surgery. I am feeling the benefit of the operation and I trust I will now be more mobile.

Lent approaches, and I wish to offer my encouragement that we observe this Holy Season well through the traditional disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving and thus prepare fully for the celebration of the mysteries of Our Lord's Passion, Death, and Resurrection in Holy Week and at Easter.

We begin Lent by accepting the blessed ashes on our foreheads as we hear the words Repent and believe in the Gospel. The call to repent is very direct and asks for a response. It requires a recognition that something is not right, sin has been committed, and that it is now time to change, to be sorry for what has happened and to be determined that it does not happen again. The Word of the Lord we hear on Ash Wednesday and through Lent tell us that listening to and believing in the Gospel will help bring about the change in our lives implied by repentance. There is a sense though that this does not happen easily or quickly, but requires a concerted effort and determination to keep going. Thus we have the six weeks of Lent through which the call to repentance is repeated and we are instructed to continually turn to God, listening to his Word and seeking his help in our weakness and our tendency not to persevere. Lent is then a time of spiritual struggle, sometimes called combat, in which we entrust our lives to God and ask his mercy and grace as we seek to truly repent, turn away from sin, and live stronger, better, lives as believers and faithful followers of Christ, the Saviour who gave up his life for us and asks us to follow in his footsteps.

An important moment in our Lenten discipline is the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, through which we confess our sins, expressing our awareness of personal failings and our need for repentance, promising to leave sin behind, and receiving the Lord's forgiveness in the words of Absolution. It is indeed a decisive moment in our lives when we come to the Sacrament, full of repentance, and there experience the welcome the Lord offers the sinner and the mercy he bestows on us when we seek his forgiveness. There is something deeply personal and reassuring in receiving the Lord's forgiveness having made what we call a good confession. I exhort and encourage you to make sure this is an important part of your Lent.

When the fear and disruption that Covid brought was at its height, I thought it pastorally good to offer people the possibility of receiving the great comfort of the Lord's forgiveness through the words of Absolution in a communal manner. In this extraordinary time, during which faith has been challenged and people have needed encouragement to come back to its regular practice, I did feel it right to offer the faithful this opportunity of celebrating the Sacrament with General Absolution. I am aware, though, that it is not the norm and it cannot replace individual confession and Absolution.

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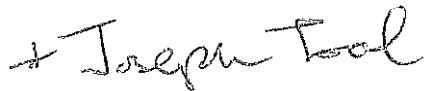
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During this Lent therefore I encourage you to make an individual confession and thus receive Absolution for your sins.

I am aware the recent services with General Absolution were well attended in a number of parishes and much appreciated spiritually by those who participated. I would recommend that Communal Services of Reconciliation continue to be celebrated, with individual confession offered when possible. Recent experience has brought the communal aspect of the Sacrament to the fore, and I think we need to continue to discern how and when that can be celebrated. I wish to reflect further on it, listen to others, both locally and across the Church, and pray for wisdom in following the Church's teaching and guiding its celebration in such a necessary sacrament here in Motherwell Diocese.

Wishing you a fruitful and blessed Lent,

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Joseph Toal". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

+ Joseph Toal