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**“Return to me with your whole heart”. (Joel 2:12)**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

May the grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!

Our Holy Season of Lent began with this powerful invitation from God: “Return to me with your whole heart” addressed by Prophet Joel – not just to the people of Old Testament – but to all of us bishops, priests, deacons, religious, lay faithful and all people of goodwill. It is a clarion call to conversion, that is, *metanoia* which seeks a radical change of the mind, heart, soul and one’s whole life orientation, directed to all humanity individually and collectively.

1. What are the things that we are called to turn away from?

We are called to turn away from sin, in all its forms, appearances and manifestations. Sin is not a question of being caught on the wrong side of God’s law or just committing a mistake because all of us are fallible human beings. Sin is fundamentally an offence against God’s love that is done with full freedom, knowledge and intention. It weakens, damages, poisons, obscures, disorders and permanently breaks our vital, dynamic and life-giving relationship with God, with ourselves, with our fellow brothers and sisters and with the whole of creation. It is the hardness of heart that turns us deaf to the cry of God, the cry of the suffering humanity and that of the earth, our common home. It is indifference that cries to the heavens – an attitude that says, “I don’t care, am I my brother’s and sister’s guardian?” (Gen 4:9) It’s good to remember that one day God will call us to account for our indifference.

Sin manifests itself in the form of selfishness, greed, bullying, rage, hatred, resentment, all forms of abuse, violence, all forms of corruption, acts of criminality and the systematic “culture” of death that is so prevalent in our villages, townships and cities. Lent presents us with a golden opportunity, what St Paul calls “a favourable time” of grace and salvation to be reconciled with God (2 Cor 5: 20, 6: 3) We must therefore, all of us examine our singular conscience, do thorough introspection, become truly sorry for all our sin(s), in the spirit of Joel rend our hearts, return to the Lord weeping, mourning and seek true forgiveness. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis reminds us often that, “God never tires of forgiving us, we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy”.

2. What are the means of conversion?

St Matthew gives us three immediate avenues that can facilitate our penitential journey back to the Lord. They are almsgiving, prayer and fasting (Mt 6: 2,5,16). These are traditional spiritual exercises that help us a great deal to become God centred and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Lent is the time to count our blessings, to recognize that God has been good to us and in gratitude to share our precious resources with those who are less fortunate than ourselves. I therefore, invite you to be generous with the Bishops’ Lenten Appeal. This is another way in which, “We, the Church, the family of God in Southern Africa, commit to work together with others for the good of all, by responding to the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth”, as explained in our Pastoral Plan. Lent is also the time to intensify our personal, family and communal prayer life. Prayer is the soul of our Christian life. It is the way in which we make our home in Christ, as he makes his own home in us. Lent is also the time for fasting, self-denial and discipline with regards to our insatiable desire(s) for pleasure, power, self-gratification and false sense of security.

### 3. A call to return to full participation and communion with the Church

This Lenten Season of 2022 in particular is the favourable time to come back to full, active and conscious participation in the Liturgical life of the Church through faithful observance of the Eucharist on Sundays and other Holy Days of obligation. I formally reinstate the Sunday obligation as of now (with immediate effect) and call for normalization of befitting preparation and celebration of the sacramental life of the Church in our Diocese. We can sing our hearts out now; however, we must continue to wear our masks throughout the Mass and in all our indoor gatherings, observe social distancing of one metre and sanitize regularly. With no proof of vaccine or negative covid-19 test our gatherings are limited to no more than 50% of venue capacity, with an upper limit of 1 000 indoors and 2000 outdoors. As for funerals we are restricted to a maximum of 200 people, the service must not exceed 2 hours and night vigils and post-funeral gatherings for meals and after-tears are still not permitted. I kindly encourage all the priests, deacons, religious and our faithful to be vaccinated. Vaccination is an act of love for our brothers and sisters especially for those who have compromised immune system.

### 4. A call to personal encounter with God

The goal of Lent and on-going conversion is to prepare us for the meaningful, fulfilling and fruitful celebration of the suffering, passion, death, resurrection, ascension and glorification of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are called to personal encounter with the risen Christ. St Paul asks a profound question, "How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If Christ has not been raised to life, our preaching and our faith are all futile and we are still in our sins" (1Cor 15: 12-17).

**I bid all of you an enriching celebration of Holy Week and the Easter Season! The Lord is truly risen! Alleluia, Alleluia!**

Yours in the Risen Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Vincent Mduzi Zungu OFM". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop Vincent Mduzi Zungu OFM