

“Times Are Changing”

Bishop Georg Bätzing’s Lenten Pastoral Letter for 2022

Abridged English-Language Translation

“Times are changing and we must as well!” Certainly, this saying is relevant to all of us. Every second of our lives brings change with it. Every breath, every move, every meeting, every comment we make changes us – everything we experience, from birth to death, is part of a wider story of change. Some go unnoticed, others are decisive and send us in a totally new direction. And in the same way that we continuously change, the times, our fellow humans and our world are also permanently undergoing renewal.

We’re now experiencing an acceleration of such developments amid the pandemic, in the shortest of timeframes, that none of us predicted. Prior to two years ago, when was working at home or homeschooling a usual conversation topic? We’re having to act in the face of new challenges, find new ways of maintaining friendships or holding family or religious celebrations. Many of us have confronted a new age of digitalization, with video conferences or recordings now part of daily life.

“Times are changing and we must as well!” So, while everything around us is in flux, we ourselves have been changing in response, even when we’re not aware of it. Change becomes embedded us. Crises and twists of fate don’t just pass us by without leaving traces. In quieter moments we can ask ourselves: What am I doing in relation to what’s happening to me? Am I afraid of these changes? Do I avoid them and insist, “Everything should remain just as it is”? Do I take them passively, enduring them somehow? Or do I actively seek to shape them, as opportunities that I’ve been given?

Lent as a Personal Path to Change

As we begin Lent – in German, “Fastenzeit”, the time of fasting – we hear the Ash Wednesday call that applies to us all: “Repent, and believe in the Gospel.” Faith and conversion prompt us to set aside personal decisions. Lent is a time for Christians to become especially aware of change. It’s a time of disruption, pushing us to find the new in everything around us, to discern change and act on it. Changes might be uncomfortable and cost us strength. But they can also unleash our strength and energy – if in unforeseen ways. Whoever has approached a major change positively has probably also noticed how freeing that can be, to release yourself from your habits. So much of what we do becomes so entrenched that, as soon as we do without the things we’re used to, we notice how much we’ve been their prisoners. Our habits become ballast to our lives and bog down our personal resources. You’ve perhaps experienced it: A shift away from normal eating or other consumption patterns comes with a feeling of lightness: self-denial lifts a burden, freeing you up for other important things.

As we leave behind the things we're used to and our comfort zones, we enter a new space. The term of art in development processes is: We wean ourselves away from what we've learned. Lent helps us thus to see ourselves better and more honestly. But the end of those processes marks the beginning of uncertainty.

We *can* be certain of one thing in our faith: Amid any change, I'm not alone. I'm carried by God, He guides my steps, and He's a benevolent counterweight to my insecurities. He loves me, He created me in His image. He resembles me – He Himself took a new path when He became man. God allows me to experience how one or another change can bring me closer to myself and lead me to him. Of this I'm certain. St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-97) expressed this interplay between our own responsibility and God's grace with these words: *"Never forget during prayer that you must do your deeds, and never forget in your deeds to recognize grace."*

The Church Undergoes Change

"The times are changing and we must as well!" applies to the church as well as to us individuals. We sense it strongly, and respond in the same variety of ways, seeing opportunity, threat, irritation, challenge. I think that change belongs to the essence of the church. If it hadn't essentially revised itself, while at the same time preserving its core, the church would longer exist today.

"We as Church" are facing all-encompassing and drastic new circumstances in every area: in our diocese, our country and worldwide. We all sense that it won't be easy. Here in the diocese, we're experiencing new forms of being church at the parish level, in the search for new structures, new ways of working together and counseling, that meet the needs and requirements of our time appropriately. It's easy to say "let's get on with it," but whoever's experiencing it knows the challenges of the new.

"Whom are we there for?" That's the question we in the Diocese of Limburg confront with these developments. We're not just there for ourselves. Our call is to be there for the people with whom we share our world. We're all seekers in this unstable time. We must be there for people who face challenges that life throws at all of us. But we believe in the possible. And that makes a difference: while it doesn't apply exclusively to us Christians, it's an unrivaled part of our spiritual arsenal.

A Shift in the Desert

In today's Gospel (Luke 4:1-13), Jesus is "led by the Spirit into the desert" before his public ministry begins. He's underway in this inhospitable place for 40 days. It is, for Him, a time of self-questioning, temptation and internal crisis, in a place that offers no sanctuary. Yet it's trust in the Holy Spirit's guidance that sustains our Lord and strengthens His trust in God. It becomes very evident to Him who and what provide foundations and certainty.

I wouldn't wholly equate our times of change with Jesus's situation in the desert. But when He so consciously allowed Himself to be guided by the Spirit of God, then we can trust that our Lord

will lead us across our personal deserts, our shared wastelands, and help us with His Spirit to reach the right decisions.

Underway Together

Life and faith declarations by other people often strengthen my own trust that all renewals are led by God himself. And I mean not just in the shape of the Bible, the saints and well-known histories but via many people who may not be particularly church-oriented or outwardly religious. I invite you during this Lenten season to listen to people who've left the church. They – similarly to those who fast – will speak of a freeing experience. Whatever was hard to undergo can unexpectedly provide energy. You can't calculate it, but what in life is calculable? I'd like to encourage us all – and I specifically include myself in this – to try it out. This fasting season could become a voyage in which we let ourselves be surprised, by both others and by God.

Pope Francis encourages us to rise into a synodal church, saying last year, "Let us experience this moment of encounter, listening and reflection as a season of grace.... For we need the Spirit, the ever-new breath of God, who sets us free from every form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles and spreads joy.... Come, Spirit of love, open our hearts to hear your voice!" *[From the Papal Address at the Opening of Synod 2021-2023 on Oct. 9, 2021 at the Vatican].*

So, in closing: Let yourselves proceed in the coming weeks to personally undertake these ways of change. Via the diocese homepage and other communications channels, you'll be able to hear from four inspirational people who've undergone the most fundamental self-alterations and are willing to speak about them. You can hear podcasts with them starting each Sunday of Lent.

They offer a fascinating chance to really bring us into the reality of their renewal, leading us together to the question of how God Himself experienced this in the desert. For myself, I'm hoping that during this Lent, we'll be on our way to becoming a church that learns. "The times are changing and we must as well."

Thus I wish for God to bestow his rich blessings on you, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Your Bishop,

Georg

Limburg, the First Sunday of Lent 2022

Raised Up

When the festival is just a memory

Dreams

Reveal the past

And God loses his face

The desert will become the way,

The way to home

Home arising

And God is there

Andrea Schwarz: Du Gott des Weges, segne uns

Bishop's letters and Andrea Schwarz's poem translated from the German by Tom Lavell