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PASTORAL LETTER

**To be read or made available
at Masses on the weekend of
17th – 18th February 2007**

My dear People.

On Wednesday of this week we begin the season of Lent. During this time we are having our diocesan process of consultation and reflection on how the Spirit is leading the Church during these changing times. I warmly encourage you all to participate and contribute to this process. You have leaflets indicating the key areas to be discussed. I wrote about the process in my Advent Pastoral Letter and will not repeat it now. Instead, I offer a pre-Lent reflection on the person of Our Lady, as we prepare for the celebration of this holy season. I hope it will help us to focus on the central mysteries of our faith which we will be celebrating in Holy Week and at Easter.

There are three key moments in the life of Our Lady which are especially timely as themes for meditation at this time of the liturgical year. In my reflections I want to suggest the ways in which the figure of Mary speaks to our condition today, to the struggles and hopes that make up our journey through life. The first is, of course, the Annunciation, when Mary said in response to the angel's message: "Let it be done unto me according to your word." With these words, Mary accepted God's will for her even though she did not fully understand it. She accepted her unique role in God's plan and was told that the Holy Spirit would come upon her to ensure that God's purposes would be fulfilled. Each of us has been given a special place in God's plan and through the sacraments we

receive the strength to fulfil it. As we follow Christ along the path of the cross and as we hear him say "Father, not my will but thine be done" let us ask God to show us more clearly what he is asking of us and ask the grace of the Holy Spirit to enable us to fulfil it with confidence and strength.

The second moment I propose for our reflection is that of the Visitation. The angel told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth, whom people called barren, was now in her sixth month of pregnancy. Mary, rather than staying at home went immediately into the hill country of Judea to be with her cousin Elizabeth. I suggest there is a very simple but vital message for us here. Whatever our role in God's providence, we fulfil God's will not by turning in on ourselves but by going out of ourselves in the service of others. True life is love and we find life and strength by reaching out to others in the particular way that God requires us to do this. Lent is a time of repentance and of change. Reflection on the mystery of the Visitation may help us to identify changes we need to make in order to fulfil God's call to love and serve our fellow men and women.

The third moment, naturally, is Mary at the foot of the cross. Standing at the cross, Mary witnessed the overwhelming love of God for us that is revealed in the crucifixion and death of Jesus. In Holy Week we, too, must be very close to the Lord in his suffering if we are to grasp and appreciate the depth of God's love for each one of us.

Mary also saw blood and water flow from the side of Christ which is a symbol of the life of Christ that is given to us through our prayer and, most of all, through the sacraments. We need to pray and to engage fully and regularly with the sacramental life of the Church if we are to receive the abundant life that Christ came to bring.

Since earliest times, Our Lady has had a central place in the life of the Church. The Christian people have prayed for Mary's intercession and have pondered the mystery of her life and her person. Out of this grew the teaching of the Church about Mary, and the key moment in the development of that teaching came at the Council of Ephesus, in 431, where it was defined that Mary was "theotokos" which means "Mother of God". The purpose of the teaching was to affirm the divinity of Christ but it also affirmed the importance of Mary in the history of salvation and in the life of the Church. This is the foundational teaching about Mary and subsequent dogmas about her are not "new" teaching but rather a deeper penetration of this vital dogma that Mary is the Mother of God. This doctrine should also remind us that Mary should never be seen or thought of in isolation from Jesus. In the art and iconography of the Eastern Church, Mary is always depicted holding Jesus in her arms. We distort the significance of Mary and of her place in God's plan if we fail to situate her in her unique role in history and in the Church as the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The dogmas that were only defined relatively recently are those of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception tells us that from the outset Mary was "full of grace". In one

sense, this sets her apart from the rest of the human race. We must remember, however, that the Holy Spirit which freed Mary from original sin from the first moment of her conception is the same Holy Spirit that is at work daily in our own lives. For us, the Holy Spirit is active in our struggles and weakness, disorder and sin. He draws us into life that is ever more abundant and out-going. In our pilgrimage through life let Mary be our guide and our hope. Faith in the Immaculate Conception is inextricably faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to change our hearts and transform our lives.

Finally, there is the dogma of the Assumption which we naturally contemplate in relation to the fundamental Christian belief in the Resurrection. This we celebrate with great solemnity at the Easter Vigil and once again I strongly encourage participation in the Easter Vigil, which is the most important liturgical celebration in the Church's Year. It invites us to believe and to hope that we, too, will rise in glory with Christ as sons and daughters of God. The doctrine of the Assumption teaches us that a human person – one of our race – has been raised with Christ in glory. That is our hope, too, and the Assumption of Our Lady should be a light and an inspiration in our own journey to resurrection.

I wish you a fruitful and blessed celebration of Lent and Holy Week.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

+Kevin

Archbishop of Southwark

Given at St George's Cathedral on
1st January 2007, The Solemnity of
Mary Mother of God