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Introduction: Here I am, Lord. Send me! – The Prophetic Mission

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to the United States, I greet you in his name and assure you of his prayers as you gather to celebrate this Eucharistic Congress and the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Diocese. I thank Bishop Baker for his invitation and for his outstanding leadership of this Diocese since 2007. Some have called this his “swan song”, but I prefer to think of it as a final gift to the Diocese of Birmingham as he approaches retirement. Indeed, the gift of gifts for us as Catholics is the Holy Eucharist.

I also want to express my gratitude to Bishop Baker for his Pastoral Letter *Called. Formed. Sent.* He has made a serious effort to read and study Pope Francis’ exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* and to bring it to his flock. This evening, I will reflect on the call of Saints Peter and Paul, but now I would first like to reflect with you on the call to be prophets.

I want to begin with the sixth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah:

In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, a with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they hovered. One cried out to the other: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!”

At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook and the house was filled with smoke. Then I said, “Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding an ember which he had taken with tongs from the altar. He touched my mouth with it. “See,” he said, “now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” “Here I am,” I said; “send me!” And he replied: Go and say to this people: Listen carefully, but do not understand! Look intently, but do not perceive!

Make the heart of this people sluggish, dull their ears and close their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and their heart understand, and they turn and be healed.

“How long, O Lord?” I asked.

And he replied: Until the cities are desolate, without inhabitants, Houses, without people, and the land is a desolate waste. Until the LORD sends the people far away, and great is the desolation in the midst of the land. If there remain a tenth part in it, then this in turn shall be laid waste; As with a terebinth or an oak whose trunk remains when its leaves have fallen. Holy offspring is the trunk.

I chose this passage, not only because you have been anointed as “priest, prophet and king” in your baptism, but also because as “missionary disciples”, you will be sent to God’s people with a prophetic message. Sometimes you will reflect on your own unworthiness to be given such a gift and a task. I also chose this passage because you may be asking a question, which many of the lay faithful are asking, especially in the face of so many scandals in the Church: *How long, O Lord?*

Yesterday, we had a Eucharistic procession and people adored Christ in reparation for the sins and failings of Church leaders and to bring healing. Many people spent time in adoration, consoling the Heart of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Each day we read stories, some old and some new, in the newspapers or online about the abuse scandal, about how the Church is declining, how she is already a smaller and less powerful Church. We are regularly reminded about fallen-away Catholics and about the rise of the “nones”. On the surface it appears that the Church’s enemies are growing stronger, and we wonder: *How long, O Lord?* But, it is precisely at this time, that God has called you to something great – to be His; to be His disciple; to be His prophet!

In this passage from Isaiah, we see a strong connection between vocation and mission. Isaiah has a powerful and mysterious encounter with God. It is at the same time wonderful and terrifying. It is full of light and wonder, but it is terrifying, because the prophet recognizes his own littleness and sinfulness in the presence of the grandeur and majesty of the heavenly court. Conscious of his own misery he says, “My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

His encounter with the Lord is more powerful than his weakness. God sends one of the seraphim to purify and cleanse the lips of Isaiah, making him fit for mission. The encounter with the Lord is life changing: there is an outpouring of mercy upon Isaiah, who is transformed into a servant of His Word. Suddenly, a new way of life takes shape in Isaiah. His heart is set ablaze to love in a new way.

The Lord asks, “*Whom should I send?*” Immediately, Isaiah, who had only just moments before recognized his own unworthiness, promptly says, “*Here I am. Send me!*”

Then God gives him an initial mission: *Go and say to this people: Listen carefully, but do not understand! Look intently, but do not perceive! Make the heart of this people sluggish, dull their ears and close their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and their heart understand, and they turn and be healed.*

It seems a lot like our mission, as we are sent to lapsed Catholics and Christians, who have rejected their heritage in favor of the latest trends or in favor of no religion whatsoever. The people of Isaiah’s time and of our time are not unlike the many to whom Jesus was sent in the Gospel; there, the mercy of God was before their eyes and His Word was in their ears, but it passed right through them because of the hardness of their hearts. They became progressively more stubborn to his invitations to conversion.

This hardness of heart, dullness of hearing, closing of eyes, and incomprehension of hearts led Isaiah to ask: “*How long, O Lord?*” To which, the Lord replied: “*Until the cities are desolate, without*

inhabitants, Houses, without people, and the land is a desolate waste. Until the LORD sends the people far away, and great is the desolation in the midst of the land. If there remain a tenth part in it, then this in turn shall be laid waste; As with a terebinth or an oak whose trunk remains when its leaves have fallen. Holy seed is its stump.”

Pope Francis has a dream for Christ’s Church – that it would be a missionary Church. He writes:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 27)

This passage from Isaiah reveals a great rule for every Christian missionary vocation: the missionary does not have to be preoccupied with the number of persons that can be reached or who will respond, but rather with the truth of the experience proposed in its *essentiality* and *depth*. These are the characteristics of the “holy seed” of which God speaks to Isaiah.

Essentiality means being concerned with that which is necessary—to the life of the person. The “holy seed” appears as a barren stump, without leaves or fruit; the leaves and fruit will come when God wills it, but everything must be absolutely centered on what really matters (cf. Mt 10:9-10) – the proclamation, the kerygma, the person. The rest is in God’s hands and will flourish according to His plan and His will. *Depth* is important too, because the stump or trunk is ready to renew the whole tree, beginning from the roots.

Just as God sent Isaiah as a missionary to begin this renewal and to offer comfort to the people during the time of exile, so too two thousand years ago, He sent His only-begotten Son into the world. Jesus, in turn, gathered to Himself the Twelve, His Apostles, and sent them. The Apostles in turn called others to be missionaries. Some, like Stephen and Philip, were called to be deacons; others, like Priscilla and Aquila, became helpers of Saint Paul. Their legacy continues in the Church. God calls each of us by name, in a unique and personal way. He calls. He forms. He sends.

God Calls. Do I listen?

But if, God calls, “Do I listen?” It is one thing to point the finger at others and to accuse them of stubbornness and not listening. It is another to look in the mirror and ask: *Do I listen?*

In the Old Testament, in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses invited the people to listen: “*Hear, O Israel, the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live...*” (Dt 4:1) Again in Deuteronomy, Moses gave them the commandment, “*Hear, O Israel. The Lord your God is God alone; therefore, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.*”

Listening to God is the way of wisdom and life. God chose to be close to his people and to give them the gift of the Law. Like Isaiah and Ezekiel, the prophet Jeremiah had to preach to a rebellious and stubborn house and exhorted the people: “*Listen to my voice; then I will be your God and you shall be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you so that you may prosper.*” (Jer 7:23) Unfortunately, the people of Israel did not listen to the voice of the Lord and were exiled.

We too struggle to listen to God's voice in a world marked by noise, shouting, and arguing – a world without silence. We prefer to place our trust in our own voice, convictions, attitudes, and customs, especially when it benefits us personally. In these moments, we are like Israel, choosing to rely on our own ways, not unlike Israel. Even when we hear his voice, we sometimes harden our hearts, lacking the courage to do what we know to be just and right.

Nevertheless, the Lord does not cease to send prophets to His people to break through their deafness and the hardness of their hearts: *From the day that your fathers left the land of Egypt even to this day, I have sent you untiringly all my servants the prophets. Yet they have not obeyed me nor paid heed; they have stiffened their necks and done worse than their fathers.* (Jer 7: 25-26).

The Lord does not grow tired of trying to win the hearts of his people. He continues sending prophets, knowing that *when you speak all these words to them, they will not listen to you either; when you call them, they will not answer.* (Jer 7:27)

God knows our stubbornness, but he will not resign himself to losing us. He wants to win our hearts. He sent Jeremiah to speak with clarity, hiding nothing from the people about how He saw them: *This is the nation that does not listen to the voice of the Lord, its God, or take correction. Faithfulness has disappeared; the word itself is banished from their speech.*" (Jer 7:28)

The insistence of the Lord in sending prophets is like the sower in the Gospel parable who throws seed everywhere, hoping that it might grow and bear fruit abundantly. The soil, however, is the human heart. The invitation of the Psalmist is to *harden not your hearts*. St. Alphonsus Liguori says, "Paradise for God is the human heart." God wants to dwell there!

God insists on sending prophets to win our love because he wants to be close to us. But God was not satisfied with giving us as gifts of love all the wonders of creation, the justice and beauty of the Law, or even the prophets. To win our love he has gone so far as to give all of Himself to us. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.* (John 3:16)

When the Eternal Father saw us dead in sin, what did He do? In His immense love, He sent His beloved Son, to make atonement for us and to restore us to life. In giving us His Son, He gave us everything that is good –grace, mercy, and love. God could have saved us without suffering and dying, but to prove His love for us, He chose to be rejected, as had all the prophets, and to die on the Cross. What could have ever led God to do such a preposterous thing? St. Bernard of Clairvaux says, "It was love, careless of its dignity."

Saint Bernadine of Siena says that people remember more vividly the signs of love shown them in death. For example, friends usually leave one another a token of affection – a ring, a family heirloom, a painting. But what did Jesus leave us at Calvary? He left us everything! He left nothing for Himself! He gives us everything once more in the Eucharist we receive at each Mass and adore upon the altar! It is the Sacrament of His Love!

How can we close our hearts to this love? This Eucharistic Congress represents a moment of grace for us to hear his Word and welcome it in silence, just as Mary did in conceiving the Savior. This is the acceptable time to open our hearts to his love and to rediscover our vocation as prophets of the Lord and as missionary disciples reminding people of God's closeness to them. *What other people has a God so*

close to it as we have?!!! In the Eucharist, God is close. He comes to be with His people. He calls us, inspired by the Eucharistic love we have received, to be prophetic witnesses to His love! He calls.

Formation of the Heart

God calls. He forms. He sends. Why did the Father send His Son? Why did Jesus send the Twelve? Why did the Apostles send others? Because God had compassion on His people. He did not wish them to die or to remain permanently desolate; rather, He wanted to renew them with His mercy. In every age, God calls and sends. But before He sends, He forms.

Beginning with the Fifth Chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel, Jesus begins forming His disciples. He ascends the Mount of the Beatitudes, just as Moses ascended Sinai, and begins to teach. He shaped and formed the hearts of disciples, instructing them about the interior attitudes that they needed to have – poverty of spirit, purity of heart, meekness, and so on. Afterward, he reminded them of their call: they were to be salt of the earth, purifying the world of wickedness and adding flavor to life, and light of the world, banishing the darkness. He instructed them in the Law, which he had not come to abolish but fulfill. Then, he told them that unless their justice exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees, they would not enter into the Kingdom.

In subsequent chapters, Jesus taught them how to pray. Finally, at the conclusion of His great Sermon on the Mount, at the end of the ninth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, Christ looked out at the vast crowd and had compassion. He not only asked the disciples to "pray that the Lord of the harvest would send more laborers into this harvest", but, in the tenth chapter, he called the Twelve to Himself and gave them authority to preach, teach, and heal in His Name and to proclaim, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"

In Saint Luke's Gospel, after the sending of the Twelve, the predictions of His Passion, and the Transfiguration, Jesus instructed His disciples about the cost of discipleship. Finally, He sent out the seventy-two.

Nota bene: In calling the Twelve, He called them to Himself. He did this before sending them on their mission. Upon the return of the seventy-two, He told them: *Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.*

There is the formation of our minds that we receive when we study the Catechism or the Bible and learn more about our faith; we are privileged to hear what others have not heard. Further still is the formation of the heart that occurs when we are with Him – in His Presence – when we adore and see Him with the eyes of faith. The Carmelite, Elizabeth of the Trinity, wrote:

"I wish I could teach you the secret of happiness the way God has taught me! You say that I don't have any worries or sufferings. It is true, but if you know how to be happy, then you can be happy in the exact opposite situation. You need to construct a "cell" within your soul. You will know that the good God is there, and you will enter this cell time and time again. When you feel nervous or assailed by melancholy, run immediately into your refuge and entrust everything to the Master. If you know Him in prayer, nothing will irritate you. In reality, there you find rest. To pray is to go with all simplicity to the one

who is Love and to remain there with Him like a child in his mother's arms – to abandon one's heart to Him. That is happiness."

While we can pray, of course, at home, there is nothing like gathering with others for Sunday Mass or making a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and praying heart to heart before the Lord. He is there, waiting for us in the Tabernacle, a hidden but very Real Presence. He waits to hear from us. He longs to warm our hearts. But why?

Saint Paul tells us that: *"God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions brought us to life in Christ."* He did this to show us *the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ*. Saint Paul continues that it was not through our merits that we have been raised up; rather, *it is by grace through faith* that we have been saved. This grace is a *gift of God*.

God's gift of Himself to us reaches its high point in the sacrifice of His Son at Calvary. In the Body of the Crucified and Risen One, we see both the glory and the humble, tenderness of our God. The glory of the Lord shines in the total giving of Himself to us – on the Cross and as Food in the Holy Eucharist. It is the glory of the Cross, with which we were marked in baptism, to which we must all give witness!

In the third chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus told Nicodemus: *"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."* This is our joy: that we are so loved by God that He not only created us but also redeemed us through the offering of His own beloved Son!

Yes, *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but may have eternal life*. Here we see that the plan of God involves mercy, not abandoning us to destruction, but drawing us to Himself to have eternal life. How many times at sporting events, one sees signs that read: "John 3:16"! For us as Christians, our sign is the sign of the Cross. At the cross we discover the sign of the Divine Mercy and gaze upon the glory of the Lord. Catholics of a previous era once learned the definition of a sacrament: "A sacrament is an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace."

The Holy Eucharist, instituted by Christ at the Last Supper, is a visible sign, under the appearance of bread and wine, of an inward reality – His Real and Substantial Presence. The Eucharistic Presence of the Lord is a reminder of God's permanent and relentless love – of the new and eternal covenant. Saint Francis de Sales says that, "In no other action can the Savior be considered more tender or more loving than in this one, where he annihilates himself, so to say, and reduces himself to food, in order to penetrate our souls and to unite himself to the hearts of his faithful."

Again, just as He called His disciples to be with Him, so too in Holy Communion, He unites Himself with them. He forms their hearts in love.

God sends us: the Mission of Building a Culture of Encounter

Only after calling and forming his disciples, did Christ send them forth. To whom did He send them and to whom does He continue to send them? He sends them to the lost sheep – to those worn out from a lack of guidance from their leaders; to those who wander through the grass hungry for something to eat but finding nothing that will really satisfy them; to those longing for true drink but who are forced to imbibe that which never quenches their thirst.

In the end, He is the One who is the true Shepherd. He is the Bread of Life, who fills us so that we never hunger. He is the Living Water, so that we will never thirst again. But it is He who calls us together to bear His Presence in the world and to the world. He does not call us only as individuals, but He calls us, rather, to be together in this mission, to be rooted in our Tradition and to be rooted in the tree that is the Church, a tree that receives its life-giving nourishment from Him. He Himself builds a Catholic culture of encounter.

He calls us, and He sends us – even in the face of opposition and division. He sends us with His authority and power, in his Name – to be a sign of Him – an Event who provokes others to seek that which will truly satisfy their hunger and quench their thirst. It is true we can feel overwhelmed with the size of our mission – the task that lies ahead – but we cannot let the immensity of the task lead us into the self-fulfilling prophecy of failing.

The greatest mistake a missionary can make – and you are missionaries – is underestimating the strength Jesus brings to our lives. We cannot live in an exaggerated fear of the world or the future; rather, we must recognize the mighty power of God’s love, especially in the Eucharist. Later today, we will hear from St. Paul’s Letter to Timothy, where Paul writes: *The Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that the proclamation might be completed, and all the Gentiles might hear it.*

He has called us. He has a genuine affection for us. He knows the details and intimacies of our lives. He is familiar with our affections and personalities – even when we ourselves lack this awareness. He comes to us in our humanity and calls us to declare ourselves for Him and His mission.

We can only do so if we have an authentic encounter with Him. Pope Benedict XVI says, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 1).

Jesus is that Event, that Person, but have we had such an encounter with Him? I think many have not had such an encounter, because they do not yet have an awareness of their own humanity. He meets us in our humanity and in our circumstances of life. It is there that He offers His grace, which builds upon our nature and perfects it. If we are serious about transmitting the faith, then we must help others discover their own humanity, which necessarily means being serious about discovering our own.

Today, faith is frequently reduced. Sometimes it is reduced to a hypothesis by which we face daily situations and problems, as if Christ’s breaking into history isn’t certain for us. The “encounter” with Christ is not really life-changing; it’s not experienced as something “real”. The starting point in the search for solutions to the problem is the unknown, rather than from a Presence of something real.

Just as common is the reduction of faith to ethics, morality or culture. Faith is reduced to defending certain values from a previously Christian culture that has disappeared. We defend values, but often without reference to Him, His Presence, or His profound love. In this post-Christian culture, even our humanity is reduced to our biological, psychological and sociological impulses.

Occasionally, faith is reduced to sentiment. Instead of recognizing the Presence whom we have encountered, faith is conceived as sentiment or feeling, an almost irrational act of the will that cannot be verified. Young people fall into the trap of thinking that reason isn’t involved in the journey of faith.

Sometimes people no longer believe or believe without really believing, that is, they practice in a purely formalistic or ritualistic way or in an overly moralistic way. The faith seems more dead than alive, because they aren't living their own humanity or aren't sufficiently committed to their own humanity and to an awareness of their own humanity. It is precisely this that is the condition for being ready when Christ offers Himself to us through an Encounter.

By "commitment to one's own humanity" or "having an affection for oneself", I don't mean in a self-referential way. Rather affection for self means being surprised at not being made by yourself and being in awe and wonder of how one is made and pondering by Whom one is made. There is surprise and wonder at not being made by ourselves. Affection for self leads to the seriousness of gazing at one's own needs and lamenting when they are not met.

Affection for self requires having a true sense of poverty of spirit, or to quote the Beatitudes, having a "hunger and thirst for righteousness." Even Zacchaeus, a wealthy man, experienced Jesus' gaze upon him, which made him recognize his needs and his value. His deeply human needs (and his awareness of them) led him to hurry down from the sycamore tree to welcome Jesus.

Whether it is the need for love, personal fulfillment, friendship and companionship – those needs which young people say they have – unless people are guided to take these needs seriously, they won't come to an authentic faith. In contrast, those who have these needs and acknowledge them have an expectant waiting for something – something that is outside of themselves; they are open to the Infinite.

Their awareness of and affection for their own humanity is awakened by a gaze of love upon them – a gaze cast not only by the Lord but also by those who accompany them on their journey. As disciples, and we never cease being disciples, we are constantly becoming more aware of our humanity and God's gaze. As "missionary disciples", we help others discover their humanity, especially by our witness.

It is the witness of a humanity changed by the Lord that has the capacity to offer a coherent testimony to others, which helps them understand that they have value. The gaze provokes a wonder in them that leads them to ask questions about what will satisfy their aspirations, the desires of their hearts, including the desire for truth, beauty, and goodness. The personal witness and the gaze of love, especially from those who have had their own humanity changed by an encounter with Christ, will allow others to also gaze at themselves with tenderness rather than self-hatred and loathing.

There is a temptation to provide the faithful with all the answers to life's problems, based on our life or faith experiences or based on the *Catechism*, and yet, the question is an anthropological one. Chesterton wrote: "They say that the wise don't see the answer to the riddle of reason. The problem is not that the wise don't see the answer. It's that the wise don't see the riddle." (G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Barnes and Noble, reprint 2004), 24).

Christ is the answer, but if we don't perceive the question (of our humanity), how can we understand the answer? This is the challenge – modern people have lost a sense of their own humanity and with it a sense of the Infinite, a sense of Mystery. As missionary disciples, we must help others to discover their own humanity by provoking questions: What is the meaning of existence? Why is there pain and death? Why is life worth living? What is True? Good? Beautiful? What does reality consist of and for what is it made?

The men and women of our day must be guided to engage reality – to engage life and to ask these questions. It is not for us to pre-determine the questions or their answers. They must engage reality. Unless they ask these sorts of questions, they will never encounter the answer: Christ.

The starting point, therefore, is not an argument about what they should or should not believe but a gaze, like the gaze which Jesus cast upon the Apostles when he first called them and constituted them, that communicates to the person that they are valued and an awareness that each person must follow a path just as we had to. We too can cast this gaze upon them. Furthermore, in inviting others to Eucharistic Adoration, they can also experience the Lord's gaze upon them.

Our mission is also to accompany others. We accompany them by adhering more faithfully to the Tradition, against which they can, through experience and their encounter with us, test the coherence of the Catholic Faith and verify its truths through reason, faith, and their personal encounter with Christ. Thus, they will learn to accept responsibility, use their freedom, and become protagonists in their future.

Nevertheless, people do have an expectation of something from the ministers of the Gospel and from Catholics: coherence. People expect that there would be a correspondence between the faith we profess with our lips and our lives and actions. Openness to conversion and regular reception of the sacrament of reconciliation is essential to this coherent witness.

Finally, in addition to coherent, authoritative witnesses, the proposal of the Catholic Faith needs to be attractive. This is God's method: He chooses a person or persons to attract others. We invite others to follow, promising them that they will experience the positive change in their lives that we have had in knowing Christ intimately. We invite them to actually get on the road and to commit themselves to walking the journey (with us). That is, we offer them signs and reminders of His Presence that provoke the person to continue the journey and to ask still more questions. In the course of the journey, each person will have to verify whether the Faith corresponds to his or her heart's desire. Like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, Christ accompanies us and causes our hearts to burn, until we recognize Him and come to know Him in the Breaking of the Bread.

This is the method of Jesus. He attracts with His Person. He engages others in their humanity, provoking more questions and inviting them to begin the path of discipleship and to verify whether His promises are true, whether they satisfy the deepest longings of the heart. He invites them to make a decisive choice to belong to Him – to commit to Him.

His method becomes our method. *As the Father has sent me, so I send you.* He attracts. He calls. He forms. He sends.