

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
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THURSDAY OF THE TWENTY-FOURTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
CMSWR NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
BASILICA OF ST. LOUIS THE KING, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

It is wonderful to join you this year as you gather for your National Assembly, addressing the theme “Called to be Experts in Communion.” As the Apostolic Nuncio, I express to you the spiritual closeness and the paternal affection of the Holy Father Pope Francis, who accompanies you with his prayers during these days.

Our Gospel is taken from the seventh chapter of Saint Luke’s Gospel, which is distinguished by many themes: the preferential option for the poor, table hospitality, the Mercy of God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the universal call to salvation in the Church. One striking feature of the Gospel is the “reversal of fortune” that occurs from its very beginning with Mary’s *Magnificat*, where Mary recounts how God *casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly*. We could think of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain”, with the “blessings” and “woes” as another example of reversal of fortune. Striking is the story of the reversal of fortunes in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Today’s Gospel too speaks of reversals.

Just prior to today’s passage, Jesus had been engaged in dialogue with the Scribes and Pharisees. He pointed out a “role reversal”, whereby sinners and tax collectors came to John and were baptized with a baptism of repentance, while the religious leaders rejected God’s plan for salvation and repentance.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is invited to the house of Simon the Pharisee. This type of gathering would have been like a symposium in which distinguished guests would have been invited, but in which there would have been a “chief guest”, known for his wisdom who would have the “last word.” What is startling is not Jesus’ presence, but rather the presence and actions of the sinful woman. Jesus was the friend of sinners, but this woman sought him out as He and the other guests reclined at table in Simon’s house.

She stood at His feet with her alabaster jar and began to weep, to wet his feet with her tears, to wipe them with her hair, and to kiss and anoint his feet with oil. In Greek, the verbs indicate continuous action – she kept doing these things. Her actions are expressions of her grief over her sins, her desire for mercy, and her gratitude for what Jesus has done for her. In a way, she, who was not an invited guest, has taken on the role of host by showing Jesus genuine hospitality. In a reversal of roles, she who was a sinner demonstrates true holiness.

In contrast, there is the inaction of Simon the Pharisee. He did not do these things for his honored guest. He, who should have known to do these things, did not. Even though he is technically the host, Simon fails to offer hospitality. Despite Jesus’ reputation as a prophet and teacher, Simon fails to perceive what this “uneducated” woman perceives, namely who Jesus is and what charity demands.

Jesus uses his status as honored guest and teacher to expose the interior thoughts of Simon, who has already made a judgment about what sort of woman this is – a sinner. Jesus tells a parable of a creditor who cancels the debts of two people, one who owed five hundred days’ wages and the other fifty. The

creditor “forgave” the debts, not only monetary debts but even the debt of sin. In light of the jubilee theme running through Luke’s Gospel, it seems obvious that the parable is really about the remission of the debt of sin.

Jesus asks, “*Which of them will love him more?*” Simon answers correctly – the one with the larger debt. Although correct, he doesn’t yet understand how the parable should be applied, so Jesus gives a very blunt explanation. These two debtors represent the woman and Simon. Jesus speaks of the Pharisee’s omission of hospitality and the woman’s acts of devotion because her debt had been remitted.

The washing, kissing, and anointing of Jesus’ feet are important gestures in light of the words of Isaiah: *How beautiful are the feet of those who bring Good News, announcing peace and bearing good news, announcing salvation and saying to Zion, “Your God is King!”* (Is 52:7) The Spirit of the Lord has anointed Jesus to bring glad tidings to the poor and to bring liberty to captives, and, therefore, to offer them salvation.

The woman heard Jesus’ proclamation of liberty and forgiveness of sins, sincerely repented, and demonstrated the authenticity of her conversion through these gestures of love. Although she committed many sins, *she has shown great love*. Jesus assures her, “*Your sins are forgiven. ... Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.*”

In hearing this parable, we can ask ourselves some questions:

First, do we welcome Jesus? Do we welcome Him in the stranger? in the migrant? in the new members of our communities? You are taking up the theme of communion in the Mystical Body of Christ and the ways that this communion is affected by cultural differences. Do we welcome these differences as enriching the body or as nuisances to be avoided?

Second, we could also examine whether we *personally* welcome Jesus into our hearts and into our communities. Each of us could think of where we would be without Him in our lives. Where were we when we first heard His voice – the call to repentance and responded by confessing our sins and receiving His mercy? How many graces and blessings has God given to us and not given to others? How many ways has our Beloved chosen to love us? Our hearts should be filled with gratitude and our works should manifest what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. The Gospel invites us, though ours sins may be many, to love much! Can we follow the example of St. Therese and perform little acts with great love?

Third, I think the Gospel is an invitation to be humble. In addition to receiving many graces from the Lord, we have received a special gift in our religious vocation. Part of that gift also involves spiritual and intellectual formation. We have been afforded the opportunity in consecrated life to explore and to be formed in the riches of our Tradition. What do we do with it? Simon the Pharisee had a great education in the Law, and yet, his pride kept him from the experiencing the joy of Jesus’ Presence.

Although he was great in the eyes of the world, Simon was in a “lower place” in the eyes of the Lord than the repentant woman. Luke’s Gospel is filled with “role reversals.” Jesus says, “*The last shall be first, and the first shall be last.*” He invites us to be humble and to assume a “lower place” so that He, the Divine Master, can say to us, “*My friend, come up a little higher!*” Many people think highly of us for our religious consecration, but true devotion consists in following the example of the woman in today’s Gospel – recognizing our own weakness and being transformed by God’s mercy to be humble servants. If we make ourselves “low” in service, God will reverse our position and exalt us for our generous love.