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My Brothers,

We have come to the high point of our day – the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. The Psalmist writes: *What thanks shall I render unto the Lord for all the good things He has rendered unto me? I shall take the chalice of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord.*

Thanksgiving is a prominent theme at the beginning of the letter to the Romans. Already in verse 8, Paul writes: *I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.* I could say the same words to you. We should think about these words in light of our fraternity as priests. A few lines later (v. 12), he writes that we should be *mutually encouraged by each other's faith.* These gatherings bring us together to strengthen our communion and to receive encouragement and consolation from one another as priests.

As priests we are called to proclaim the truth of the Gospel in its fullness. Today's First Reading continues the first chapter of Romans and begins with verse 16: *For I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for Jew first, and then Greek.*

As heralds of the Gospel, we should realize its power; these are no mere words, but the Word, the power of God Himself. Pope Francis reminds us of what those who encounter and accept the Gospel are offered: "Those who accept his offer are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness. With Christ joy is born anew." (EG, 1).

We should not be ashamed of the Gospel, yet often the fullness of the faith is not proclaimed. We forget the power of the Gospel and the grace of our ordination. Wanting to keep the peace or not wanting to offend anyone – or perhaps, because we are ashamed of some aspects of Church teaching – we hesitate and fail to offer the fullness of life to the faithful.

Instead, we allow other voices to be heard, voices which *suppress the truth by their wickedness.* We allow secular philosophies and ideologies to have the upper hand, with their rejection of God as the author of creation. Relying not on God but on human reasoning, they *became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened. While they were claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of God for the likeness of an image of mortal man or of birds or of four-legged animals or of snakes.* These ideologies invert the created order.

What Paul wrote of in the first century, you experienced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as Vietnamese priests. Ideologies attempted to erase God and replace Him with a collectivist state. In erasing God, they began their assault on man, made in God's image and likeness. Fortunately, you have a host of witnesses who preferred to suffer rather than to *suppress the truth* about God. Where would the Church in Vietnam or the Church in the United States be without this precious witness?!!

Today, there are new ideologies that want to reshape how we understand the human person and the relationship between man and woman. In verses 24 and 25, (and, although we don't have these verses today, verses 26-32) Paul speaks of people being handed over to impurity; the mutual degradation of the body; exchanging the truth of God for a lie; worshiping creature rather than Creator; and exchanging natural relations for unnatural ones. These are very challenging verses, especially in today's culture and political climate.

Are you ashamed of the Gospel or are you prepared to proclaim it with boldness? It is a reality that if one were to be bold in preaching on these texts today, there would be a backlash. Are we ashamed of the Gospel? Are we willing to suffer for it? Moreover, if we do not proclaim it, what will happen to our young people and our culture?

We must find our voice, and for this we need to be close to the Lord. To proclaim the Gospel boldly and compassionately, we must be close to the One who was courageous and merciful. It is fitting then that we hear this reading on the feast of St. Teresa of Avila, who described praying as "being on terms of friendship with God, frequently conversing in secret with Him, who, we know, loves us" (*Vida*, 8, 5). In prayer, we come to deepen our friendship with God and to realize that it was He who first extended his hand of friendship to us, He who first seized the initiative. In nourishing our interior life, we can be like Paul who said: *I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.*

However, if we preach on these texts, then not only do we need to have courage, but we also need to have prudence and compassion. Moreover, no one likes a hypocrite. In preaching about irreligion or sexuality and marriage, we can focus too much on other people's sins and not on the beautiful teachings about God as Creator or the beauty of married life. As priests, we must be instruments of mercy, and we cannot come off as judgmental.

Paul warns at the beginning of the second chapter of Romans: *Therefore, you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. ... Do you suppose you will escape the judgment of God?*

It is this type of hypocrisy and judgmental attitude that Jesus criticizes in the Gospel, when He says: *Oh you Pharisees! Although you cleanse the outside of the cup and the dish, inside you are filled with plunder and evil. You fools! Did not the maker of the outside also make the inside?*

As priests, we need to be men of prayer and men of integrity. The commitment to prayer helps us always to remember the Creator, the One who made us and called us – to be His child and to be His priests. Before the thrice holy God, we realize our own sinfulness and inadequacies, and like Peter, we are inclined to say, *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man."*

Jesus didn't depart from Peter, nor will He depart from us. He sees our potential to do great good for the Church and to bring His salvation to others, to be mediators of His Presence. He extends His hand to us in friendship. Whether we take His hand of friendship and mercy is up to us. Taking His hand involves a commitment not only to prayer but to personal and pastoral conversion. It involves placing everything – all that we have and all that we are – in His hands.

If there is to be renewal in the Church today, then that renewal must also take place in the heart of the priest. The first work of the Holy Spirit is conversion. Do we let the Spirit of Jesus animate our lives

and ministry? The People of God need you, not to be judge, but to be a father to them. At your ordination, you made a generous offering of your life. You made a commitment to be a father.

The Holy Father, in his recent letter to priests, acknowledged the difficulties in the priesthood but also priestly generosity, writing:

“They embody a spiritual fatherhood capable of weeping with those who weep. Countless priests make of their lives a work of mercy in areas or situations that are often hostile, isolated or ignored, even at the risk of their lives. I acknowledge and appreciate your courageous and steadfast example; in these times of turbulence, shame and pain, you demonstrate that you have joyfully put your lives on the line for the sake of the Gospel.” (Pope Francis, Letter to Priests, 4 August 2019)

This is what I would like to say: Give courageous and steadfast example to those around you. Be willing to put your lives on the line joyfully for the sake of the Gospel! The Pope and I are grateful for your service and your commitment. We all know, it is not easy, but do not worry – if you have God, you have everything.

I conclude then with the Prayer of St. Teresa of Avila:

Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing away: God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices.”