

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
SUNDAY OF THE SIXTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
“SOMETHING TO START FROM” - 2019 NEW YORK ENCOUNTER
METROPOLITAN PAVILION, NEW YORK
FEBRUARY 17, 2019

My Friends,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father’s representative to the United States, I greet you in his name and express His Holiness’ spiritual closeness and paternal affection for you as you gather for the New York Encounter. It is a privilege to be with you, and I want to thank Olivetta Danese for her kind invitation.

In the Gospel, Jesus and the Twelve descend from the mountain. Jesus had ascended to pray, after which He called the Twelve by name. Upon their descent, they see a vast crowd, and Jesus begins to teach them about discipleship. Jesus delivers his “Sermon on the Plain,” which gives Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, which includes both blessings and woes.

The use of blessing and woe highlights the theme of a “reversal of fortune” used in Luke’s Gospel, beginning with the *Magnificat* when Mary says that God *has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly*. The theme of reversal of fortune and the use of Blessings and Woes allude to two different ways of living: the fulfilling way of discipleship *or* the way of the world – as if the coming of Jesus had made no impact on our reality, a way that leads to destruction.

When Jesus says, “Blessed are you”, He is not so much referring to happiness, or *eudaimonia*, as much as He is *makarios* or congratulations. He says: “Congratulations that you are poor, hungry, weeping, and persecuted! Congratulations for living a life that is righteous and pleasing to God!”

Among the poor, hungry and sorrowful, we find people who are not dependent on worldly things for satisfaction but who are consoled knowing that worldly goods and success do not guarantee membership in the Kingdom. Father Giussani said that “The poor in spirit are those who have nothing, except one thing, through which and by which they are made: an endless aspiration: ... a boundless expectant awaiting. It’s not a boundless expectant awaiting because the heap of things expected is endless. No, they don’t expect anything, but they live a boundless openness.”

The blessing is that the disciples have an openness to the Infinite. They recognize the needs of their own humanity and thus are free to seek the face of the Lord and be renewed by His Presence. The joy of finding Him and sharing in His life is something like that which Paul described, writing: *I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish that I may gain Christ.*

At the change of an epoch, when traditional norms and authority are challenged, when people of faith are marginalized, when pastoral plans appear to have failed, and when people are scapegoated, we should not despair. Both the loss and the need we experience can be an opportunity to seek the Divine, without pre-conceived notions and solutions. The unease of the

situation can awaken us to the need for mercy, to be looked upon and valued, or to be understood. These needs awaken us to the promise of something – something from which we can build anew. The experience of poverty, hunger, sorrow, and persecution could even be proof that one is sharing in the life of Christ and His Kingdom and may serve to fortify our adherence to God.

Jesus speaks of both blessing *and* woe. *Woe* is not a material curse; rather, the *woes* are best understood as disfavor in God's sight. The *woes* are a call to repentance. By placing their trust in material things, people endanger their salvation, not only by not relying on God but also by neglecting the needs of their neighbor. Jesus warns the powerful that unless they repent, destruction awaits. The four sets of blessings and woes – poor versus rich; hungry versus full; weeping versus laughing; being hated versus being well-respected – highlight the call for the disciples to live differently. Do we live differently because we know Jesus? Has he impacted our humanity?

Poor versus Rich: In Luke's Gospel, there is a recurring theme of a preferential option for the poor. It is not that God is always displeased with the rich; rather, it is a matter of security. True security is in the Lord, not in material wealth or power. The prophet Jeremiah reminds us: *Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord. He is like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream: it fears not the heat when it comes; its leaves stay green; in the year of drought it shows no distress but still bears fruit.*

Again, Father Giussani teaches us: "People cannot understand themselves as free in the absolute sense: because they didn't exist, and now they do – they depend. Necessarily. The choice is very simple: They depend on that which makes reality, that is, God, or they depend on the randomness of the movement of reality, that is, power. The terrible error of Western civilization is having forgotten and rejected this. And so, in the name of their own autonomy, the people of the west became slaves of every form of power. And all civilization's clever development of tools only serves to increase their enslavement."

How different is the Kingdom of God! Jesus tells the poor that "yours *is* the Kingdom of heaven", while he warns that the rich have already *received* their consolation. The poor share in the fruits of the Kingdom even though they live at the peripheries; in contrast, the rich, having already received full payment, becoming enslaved to power, should not expect anything further. And maybe this is what Zacchaeus realized, though he was wealthy – that there was still an emptiness inside, a lack of authentic freedom. The upward gaze of the Lord toward him in the sycamore tree offered him the promise of something more – of liberation. That gaze remains full of promise as it is now cast upon us.

Hungry versus Full: Here the Lord contrasts those who do not have enough to meet their daily needs with those who have an abundance. God promises that those who struggle to survive will have their fill, while those who selfishly hoard earthly riches will find themselves empty. The story of Lazarus, who used to beg for scraps for the rich man's table but who later found his reward in the bosom of Abraham, illustrates the point; there the rich man was "full" of what this world offered but found himself in torment for failing to act on behalf of his hungry brother Lazarus. To those who hunger now, Jesus promises not only that they will have their hunger satiated, but in the Kingdom, they will be abundantly filled. What, or rather, Who offers us that which corresponds to the deepest longings of the human heart?

Weeping versus Laughing: Jesus points out to his disciples that those who weep now are those who have suffered true pain in their lives, the result of marginalization and exclusion.

Through indifference, those who laugh now set themselves up for eternal desolation. There is a woe to those who laugh; they are the ones who receive a transient, worldly joy, often at the expense of others.

But what of eternal joy? Jesus promises lasting joy to those who suffer and are excluded for bearing witness to Him – the joy of knowing God and of being called to discipleship. In the Kingdom, there is a reversal of fortune; they will experience welcome and acceptance rather than rejection and stigmatization. In the second reading, Paul speaks of the Resurrection, offering this word of hope: *But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep*. The Risen Lord reverses our fortunes; instead of death, weeping and mourning, we have the hope of eternal life in heaven.

Hatred versus Being Well-Respected: Here the blessing of being hated is qualified by suffering in witnessing to Him. The prophets suffered persecution for their fidelity, but they found blessing doing God's will. If we are doing God's will, then we should expect persecution and resistance from the powers of this world. Like the Apostles, the disciple should *rejoice for having been found worthy to suffer for the sake of the Name*.

In contrast to the truly prophetic voice, sometimes we experience the temptation of desiring human respect: wanting to be accepted by the wealthy, the powerful, and those with influence. Some people never want to "rock the boat" but prefer to keep quiet and to be well-liked. This is like Herod when confronted by John the Baptist. He liked John and was convicted by his preaching, but because of the oaths he had sworn and because of the guests – human respect – he had John beheaded. Jesus warns his disciples of the need to please God rather than men. The difference is literally the difference between life and death.

Today's Gospel is an invitation to examine our own attitudes. What is that we really seek? Are we seeking the face of the Lord, seeking to adhere to and follow Him or are we seeking the admiration of the world with little care for the least among us? There is a stark choice to be made: to continue following the old way of doing things or to start from something new. The Sermon on the Plain echoes what was said by the Lord in the Book of Deuteronomy: *I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live*.