

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
SATURDAY OF THE 28TH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
MASS OF INVESTITURE FOR THE KNIGHTS OF MALTA
CATHEDRAL OF ST. MATTHEW, WASHINGTON, DC
OCTOBER 20, 2018

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative to the Holy Father to the United States, I want to express the warm wishes, spiritual closeness and paternal affection of Pope Francis, and to also express his heartfelt congratulations to all those who will be invested in the Order this morning.

The Knights of Malta are an outstanding Catholic organization, dedicated to performing many corporal and spiritual works of mercy. They are especially renowned for their care for the sick, through the operation and support of hospitals, emergency relief, homes for the elderly and disabled; the hospital of Bethlehem; and through support of Catholic physicians and bioethicists. Recently, they have been at the forefront of bringing Christ to those who are incarcerated in prisons and jails – some of the new peripheries of society.

The Knights have a long and noble tradition, which has evolved over the centuries, but while the mission of the Knights has adapted to the times and circumstances, the mission remains essentially the same – to help others to recognize and truly know Christ. Effectively, this means giving witness to Christ in both word and deed. Pope Paul VI, who was just canonized last week, wrote that “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41).

Today’s Gospel is taken from the twelfth chapter of Saint Luke. That chapter began with many people crowding together, even trampling one another, just to hear Jesus speak (12:1). Jesus spoke to the crowds, beginning with these words: “*Beware of the leaven – that is, the hypocrisy – of the Pharisees.*” He went on to explain how all things would be brought to light and shouted from the housetops. He also told his disciples not to be afraid of those who can kill the body but to concern themselves with the one who can cast into Gehenna. This is the context for today’s Gospel.

Rather than living in fear, a disciple should focus on being a witness who acknowledges Christ before others in this life. Jesus promises to acknowledge his faithful witnesses before the angels of God in the judgment in the next life. There is also a warning that whoever denies Jesus now will be denied before the angels of God. How faithful is our witness to Christ and His Church? How faithful is our witness to the dignity of the human person and the value of human life in all its stages?

It is truly fitting that the patron saint of the Order of Malta is Saint John the Baptist. He was the great witness to the Truth, to Jesus, the Eternal Word. It is he who told Herod that it was not right to have his brother’s wife. Herod certainly had the power over John’s life, but this did not deter John from proposing the truth once more to Herod. John was more concerned about giving prophetic witness to God than being popular. Herod was concerned about human respect and

worldly power, and though he liked to listen to John and was even attracted to him, he had John put to death because of the oaths he had sworn.

John the Baptist was one in whom there was no hypocrisy. He was the last and greatest of the prophets, but Jesus says that even the least in the Kingdom is greater than he. How privileged we are to be called to be God's children and to share in the life of the Kingdom! But how do we respond to the gift of baptism and membership in the Church? Is it with fidelity or hypocrisy?

Blessed John Henry Newman wrote:

How reasonable is our Lord's warning to us... to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy: professing without practicing. He warns us against it as leaven, as a subtle insinuating evil which will silently spread itself throughout the whole character... He warns us that the pretense of religion never deceives beyond a little time.... Let us ever remember that all who follow God but with a half heart, strengthen the hands of his enemies, ... perplex inquirers after truth and bring reproach upon the Savior's name. ... Woe unto the deceiver and the self-deceived. (John Henry Newman, "Profession without Practice," in *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 89-91.)

No one of us is perfect, but with the solemn commitment which we undertake in our vocation, as well as members of the Order, something greater is demanded of us in giving witness. If we fail by speaking a word against the Son of Man (or by remaining silent instead of defending Him), Jesus teaches us that we will be forgiven. Such was the case of Saint Peter who denied Jesus three times yet sought his forgiveness. On the other hand, the one who is unrepentant blasphemes against the Holy Spirit and will not be forgiven. Obstinacy in opposing the Holy Spirit, whose first work is conversion, will lead to our eternal ruination.

Jesus invites his disciples not to be afraid, but to be open to the Spirit who accompanies them. In times of trial and persecution, he reminds them: *Do not worry about how or what your defense will be or about what you are to say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that moment what you are to say.*

Therefore, let us ask God for a greater openness to the Spirit that we may be his faithful witnesses. I conclude with a prayer of Saint Bonaventure for the gifts of the Holy Spirit:

Lord Jesus, as God's Spirit came and rested upon you, may the same spirit rest upon us, bestowing his sevenfold gifts. First grant us understanding, by which your precepts may enlighten our minds. Second grant us counsel, by which we may follow in your footsteps on the path of righteousness. Third, grant us courage, by which we may ward off the Enemy's attacks. Fourth, grant us knowledge, by which we can distinguish good from evil. Fifth, grant us piety, by which we may acquire compassionate hearts. Sixth, grant us fear, by which we may draw back from evil and submit to what is good. Seventh, grant us wisdom, that we may taste fully the life-giving sweetness of your love. Amen.