

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
30TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
CELEBRATION OF THE 800TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF
THE ORDER OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY OF MERCY (MERCEDARIANS)
OUR LADY OF LOURDES CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA
OCTOBER 29, 2017

My brothers and sisters in Christ,

I am pleased to be with you on this Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time as we also celebrate the eight hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Mercedarian Order. I am grateful for the invitation of the Vicar Provincial, Father Michael Rock, and for the presence of Archbishop Chaput, so many members of the Order, including the Third Order, as well as all the lay faithful. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father Pope Francis, I wish to express the heartfelt affection, sincere congratulations, and spiritual closeness of His Holiness.

In the Gospel today, Jesus summarizes the Divine Law in two commandments – love of God and love of neighbor. Jesus knew that the Pharisees were testing Him. He could have simply answered their question by reciting the *Shema* (Deut 6:4): *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*. But, Jesus went further and included a second commandment, which is like the first: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Mt 22:39), which comes from Leviticus. The implication is that the love of God is inseparable from the love of neighbor.

In his encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

The unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbor is emphasized. One is so closely connected with the other that to say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbor or hate him altogether ... Love of neighbor is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God. ... Love of neighbor ... consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. (POPE BENEDICT XVI, ENCYCLICAL LETTER DEUS CARITAS EST, 25 DECEMBER 2005, 16; 18)

This love of God and neighbor is at the center of the Christian message. It was this, at the inspiration of the Blessed Virgin Mary, that led Saint Peter Nolasco to found the Mercedarian Order. Jesus Himself had given us the example of this incarnated love when He washed His disciples' feet at the Last Supper, when He united Himself intimately to His Father in prayer at Gethsemane, and when, finally, He offered Himself, as a Victim, as Ransom, as a pure and pleasing sacrifice to His Father for the salvation of the world upon the Cross. Jesus had instructed the Apostles: *There is no greater love than this than to lay down one's life for one's friends*. (John 15:13)

Jesus offered His life's blood, the Blood of Redemption, as a ransom for the many. The life of Jesus, of course, is intimately connected with the life of His Mother, who introduced Jesus to this world to set captives free, especially from the slavery of sin. Mary too surrendered her whole life to God – out of love for Him and for her neighbor, when she said, *Let it be done unto me according to your word*." Inspired by the words of Jesus and the example and promptings of the Virgin, Peter Nolasco founded an Order to set captives free, to ransom them from their persecutors, and to be willing, with perfect freedom, to offer one's life for one's neighbor by going

to the “peripheries” of those times – to Moslem prisons in order to barter and trade, even oneself, to set fellow-believers free.

Today, challenges remain. Christians are still being persecuted for their faith, especially in the Holy Land and the Middle East, and are being imprisoned or forced to flee. New types of prisons and prisoners are emerging. Migrants and refugees are being detained. Humans are sold and trafficked on a scale not previously seen. Many suffer from various forms of slavery to the passions – addictions to alcohol, drugs, or pornography. The need to rediscover and promote the charism of the Mercedarian Order could not be greater!

In the days in which the Order was founded, the greatest risk was that of apostasy, abandoning the Christian faith in the midst of persecution. From the founding of the Order, the Mercedarians have always understood the redemption of captives as a permanent service for the faith of those Christians who were most in danger of losing their faith. In this regard, the words of Pope Francis are enlightening:

In the Old Testament, the requirement to be holy, in the image of God who is holy, included the duty to care for the most vulnerable people, such as the stranger, the orphan, and the widow (Exodus 22:20-26). Jesus brings this covenant law to fulfillment... No, in light of this Word of Jesus, love is the measure of faith, and faith is the soul of love ... Remember this, love is the measure of faith. (POPE FRANCIS, ANGELUS ADDRESS, 26 OCTOBER 2014)

The Holy Father has called the whole Church to be in a permanent state of mission, acknowledging that we are living not so much in an “age of change but in a change of age.” The landscape in which the faith is proclaimed has changed drastically. About half of the baptized under age 30, no longer self-identify as Catholic. The faith is in danger, threatened by advancing secularization, the dictatorship of relativism, and groups which seek to silence the Christian voice. Therefore, one purpose of the Order – to strengthen those whose faith is weak amid persecution – remains just as critical to the life of the Church today as it did at the Order’s founding. Ultimately, it is the Truth that sets us free. It is not only the truth of the Faith, but it is especially the Truth who is the Person of Jesus Christ. Again, I recall the words of Pope Benedict:

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)

Your Order – indeed all of us – must facilitate this encounter with the Lord, so that the world may know the love of God and the tenderness of God’s mercy. A hallmark of Mercedarian spirituality is the practice of merciful charity, born from the recognition that it was the infinite love of “God the Father, who, in His great mercy, sent Jesus Christ into this world” and that it was “the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with great mercy and compassion” who decided to found and establish the Order. The redemption of captives – in whatever form – has always been considered a magnificent work of mercy and charity.

My dear friends, we gather in this magnificent church, to give thanks to God for all he has done in the Mercedarian Order over these past 800 years. We offer the sacrifice of the Mass, believing firmly in the power of the Precious Blood of the Lord to redeem and save. Renewed for mission and reflecting on these scriptures, we glimpse two faces – the face of the Father and the face of our brother, made in God’s image – the faces of those whom we serve and love. It was love of God and neighbor that motivated Saint Peter Nolasco to found the Order eight centuries ago. Now, it is the *charity of Christ that urges us on* (2 Cor 5:14) into the future!