

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE**  
**APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**  
**SATURDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT, MARCH 30, 2019**  
**CHAPEL OF SAINT TURIBIUS**  
**PONTIFICAL COLLEGE JOSEPHINUM, COLUMBUS, OHIO**

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Chancellor of the Pontifical College Josephinum, I am very happy to return to this Chapel of Saint Turibius. As the Apostolic Nuncio, I greet you in the name of the Holy Father Pope Francis and assure you of his prayers, his spiritual closeness, and his paternal affection. Allow me to express my gratitude to the faculty and staff here, both the clergy and the lay faithful, who have committed themselves to the important work of seminary formation, which is so essential at this stage in the life of the Church; thank you for the many sacrifices you make and have made. In a special way, I want to publicly thank Monsignor Schreck, the Rector, who will finish his term as Rector. He has served faithfully as President and Rector for seven years; an ordinary term is only five years, but he generously agreed to stay an additional two years. Monsignor, thank you for all you have done! I also want to greet the Rector-designate, Father Beseau. Father, I know the new bishop, the faculty and staff, and students are looking forward to your leadership and to a fruitful collaboration in the formation of new priests.

Today, our Gospel, with the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, cuts to the heart of Lent. It helps us examine our relationship with God and our neighbor. It helps us better understand the need for personal conversion and the Mercy of God. First, we have the Pharisee. He is a very religious man who comes to the Temple. He carries out many religious practices: he fasts twice a week and he tithes. The scriptures say that *he said this prayer to himself*. Although standing, which was the position for prayer, and addressing the prayer to God, his prayer is directed more toward himself. Instead of praising God, he lauds himself. The Pharisee is the classic example of a narcissistic and self-referential person. This is a great danger for us as individuals and collectively as a Church; rather than directing our lives toward God and toward our neighbor who is made in God's image, we look inwardly.

Furthermore, the Pharisee is self-righteous and judgmental. He compares himself not only to the tax collector but to all of humanity, when he says: *I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax collector*. His outward behavior, in contrast to everyone else's, is exemplary, and he wears this as a badge of pride. He believes that he is doing great things and compares himself to those who in his judgment are wretched sinners. If he had a real relationship with God (and this should force us to examine the quality of the relationship we have with Him, that is, the quality of our prayer), he would recognize his imperfections and God's perfection. Saint Gregory the Great writes:

“One who thinks he is right without knowing the highest standard of what is right is in error. We often think a piece of wood is straight without comparing it to a straight edge. When we do place a straight edge next to it, we see how bent and uneven it is, because the straight edge naturally cuts off and rebuffs what the eye mistakenly approved.” (ST. GREGORY THE GREAT, *MORALIA IN JOB*, BOOK 5, XXXVII.67)

It is precisely the Pharisee's judgmental, self-righteous attitude, which many in the Church today possess, that turns people away from God and the Church. The fact of the matter is that despite his religious practices, the Pharisee is unaware of any need for God in his life. He is like a Pelagian who believes that what he does himself is enough – enough to justify and save himself. The Pharisees attitude ironically is far from that of God, who loves all people, even sinners. His words show that he has forgotten the most important commandments: love of God and neighbor.

In contrast, the Tax Collector sees himself in the light of God. He looks toward God, and in the process, his eyes have been opened to see himself as he truly is – a sinner. Of this, Pope Francis says:

“His prayer is very short; it is not as long as the Pharisee’s: ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ Nothing more. What a beautiful prayer! In fact, tax collectors – called publicans – were considered impure people, submissive to foreign rulers, were disliked by the people and typically associated with ‘sinners’. The parable teaches us that a man is righteous or a sinner, not in virtue of his social class, but by the way he relates to God and treats his brothers and sisters.” (POPE FRANCIS, WEDNESDAY AUDIENCE, 1 JUNE 2016)

By re-directing himself toward God, he realizes the misery of his own soul and understands his need for God. He is a beggar before God. He begs for mercy. He knows that he needs mercy. From God’s mercy, he will learn to become merciful himself. The Tax Collector may have many of this world’s goods and the respect of public authorities, but he recognizes that he is not truly alive. True life comes from being in relationship with God and others, from receiving mercy, and for that matter, everything from God as a gift.

Indeed, we, as priests and future priests, must recognize the gift of our vocation and what we have received from God: the Gospel, the sacraments; the living Tradition of the Church; mercy, et cetera. It is this that we have received, and it is this that we are asked to hand on to the holy, People of God. We are called to communicate and to be living signs of His Presence. People should encounter us as signs of God’s Presence among them – signs that provoke them to pursue a relationship with Him and so, like the tax collector, discover how to orient their lives and be directed toward God and the things that really matter.

The tax collector learned that he will always need God in his life. He will need God’s goodness and the gift of his forgiveness. Of course, he is not dispensed from the commandments of God or from being good; rather, the mercy and grace for which he asks are a necessary starting point for being made fit to do good. Because of God’s goodness in bestowing mercy, he begins to be good himself. That is what we want not only for ourselves but for our flock – to help them to know the goodness and the tenderness of God.

This parable is fundamentally about the power of mercy, and the tax collector begs for it. With perspective, we can also see God as a beggar – the One who begs for man’s heart. I share these words of Monsignor Luigi Giussani:

“The mystery of mercy shatters any image of complacency or despair; even the feeling of forgiveness lies within the mystery of Christ. This is the ultimate embrace of the Mystery against which man ... cannot oppose anything, can make no objection. He can abandon it, but in doing so he abandons himself and his own good. The Mystery as mercy remains the last word even on all the awful possibilities of history.

For this reason, existence expresses itself, as the ultimate ideal, in *begging*. The real protagonist in history is the beggar: Christ who begs for man’s heart, and man’s heart that begs for Christ.”

(L. Giussani, “In Simplicity of My Heart, I have gladly given you everything,” testimony during the meeting with Pope John Paul II with the ecclesial communities and new communities, 30 May 1998)

Jesus concludes today’s Gospel with these words: *I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.* Jesus teaches us that those who seem farthest from holiness – even people like you and me – can become models for the acceptance of God’s mercy and can offer a glimpse of the power of God’s mercy in their lives.