

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
VIGIL OF THE THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
“MAGNIFY” YOUTH RALLY, DIOCESE OF VENICE (FLORIDA)
CHARLOTTE HARBOR EVENT AND CONFERENCE CENTER, VENICE, FLORIDA
NOVEMBER 4, 2017

My Dear Friends in Christ,

It has been a blessing to spend this day with you. I want to thank Bishop Dewane for his kind invitation. As the personal representative of the Holy Father to the United States, I want to express Pope Francis' spiritual closeness and paternal affection for each of you and to assure you of his prayers. I am confident that he would be filled with joy to see all of you and your enthusiasm for the life of faith and your deep love of our Eucharistic Lord. From time to time you may hear that you are the *future of the Church*, but while you certainly will contribute something to the future of the Church, *you are vital members of the Church now*. Even now you bring something to the community of faith. I want to assure you that you are sons and daughters of the Church and brothers and sisters to each other. The Holy Father and we, your bishops, take you and your faith seriously. Your presence here today fills us with hope and gives witness that you take your faith seriously.

Unfortunately, that is not true for many young people in our world today. At the Convocation of Catholic Leaders which was held in Orlando this past July, bishops, priests, religious, and lay leaders heard about the “nones.” Nearly twenty-five percent of Americans report having no religious affiliation and of those, under age 30, who were baptized as Catholics nearly fifty-percent identify as no longer having any religion. This is why your presence and witness is so important. You will be living reminders that God's love is real!

When asked why they no longer practice any religion, most of these young people say that it is not that they haven't struggled with questions of faith or the meaning for their lives; rather, it is that they see so few people, especially religious leaders and adults, living the faith they profess. One of the key factors to a loss of faith is bad witness or hypocrisy. Young people, people like yourselves, hunger for authenticity. They want leaders who have integrity. You can be those leaders. You can magnify the presence and joy of the Lord in the world!

In the Gospel, Jesus confronts the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. They were the teachers of the community. They knew the Law very well and made rigorous demands on their followers, but their own conduct contradicted what they taught. In Jesus, the people, who had a true hunger for God, found their champion. Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, pointing out that they “*preach but do not practice*”; that “*they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they will not lift a finger to help them.*”

Jesus also told the crowds to “*practice and observe whatever they tell you, but do not follow their example.*” He highlighted the truth of God's Law and the need to respect those entrusted with authority. What the scribes and Pharisees had forgotten was that authority is for service, not for controlling others or making their lives miserable. Jesus knew that the Law was to help people along their journey, not weigh them down. The scribes and Pharisees were concerned about themselves, their privileges, and their position in the “*chair of Moses.*” In a sense, they were self-referential. They were asking, “What's in it for me?” They neglected the true good of their people.

In contrast, there is Jesus. He is the true Teacher, the new Moses. He is the one who speaks the truth with authority. His words are not “the words of men, but the words of God”, as Saint Paul states. (1 Thess 2:13) Jesus teaches not only by His word but also by His example. Looking at the crowd, his students, Jesus must have asked: “What can I do for them?”

If you think about your favorite teacher, he or she is probably your favorite not only because he or she is smart, funny, or a good speaker. That teacher probably brings out the best in you. You have some sense that the teacher really cares about you and is willing to challenge and to push you to be better, to be more. That person believes in you and in what you can accomplish, even if you still make mistakes from time to time. That teacher can make judgments about the work you have done but without judging you. Your favorite teacher probably sees teaching not just as a job but as a service, a calling. If you were to grow up and become a teacher, you would want to be a lot like that person.

Jesus is the model teacher and gives his students, his disciples, the perfect example. He comes to lift people’s burdens, rather than impose them. He comes to forgive sins and to offer those who have sinned or failed a new chance. He thinks more of us when we repent rather than less for having made a mistake.

Jesus practices what He preaches. When He says, “*He who is greatest among you shall be your servant,*” he means it. Thus, he who is true God and true man can humble himself at the Last Supper to wash his disciples’ feet. When Jesus says, “*whoever humbles himself will be exalted,*” he means it, and He proves it when He humbles Himself unto death on a Cross – out of love for us; for this the Heavenly Father exalts Him. The Last Supper and the Sacrifice of Calvary are what we celebrate at each Mass. God humbles Himself to become our Food, the Bread from Heaven. His love for us is overwhelming and can bring out the best in us.

He is the Teacher. We are his disciples, his students. What have you learned from Jesus? What have you learned about yourself, knowing that you are loved so much by Jesus? Who is the Master, the Teacher, calling you to be in and for His Church?

The Church needs your witness. Just as Jesus was a person of integrity, you too can be authentic witnesses to God’s love. Do not sell yourselves short or think that you cannot do something just because of past failures. Think of the saints – Francis of Assisi, Augustine, Mary Magdalene – no one of them was perfect but came to be perfected in love and by love.

Do not believe that just because you are young that you cannot do great things. You were not made for mediocrity but for greatness. The model of all disciples is the Blessed Virgin Mary. She trusted God and opened herself to Him, saying, “I am the lowly handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word,” and so she conceived the Savior. Later Mary would exclaim, “My soul magnifies the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. From this day, all generations will call me blessed.” She humbled herself before God and she was exalted. Open to God’s Word and Presence in her life, she found true joy and brought joy to the whole world.

My friends, this is what our world needs – joy-filled witnesses who magnify the greatness of the Lord. This is your calling as Christians. This is who you are. Saint Francis De Sales, “Be who you are and be that well!” Be joyful, missionary disciples!