

**HOMILY OF THE MOST REVEREND CHRISTOPHE PIERRE  
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
TUESDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF EASTER  
NATIONAL DISCERNMENT ON CORRECTIONAL MINISTRIES  
NATIONAL SHRINE OF SAINT JOHN PAUL II, WASHINGTON, DC  
APRIL 24, 2018**

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to this country, I want to express the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of Pope Francis to all who have gathered for this National Discernment on Correctional Ministries and all who will gather for the conference tomorrow. Certainly, the Holy Father is very supportive of your work and hopefully his example of visiting prisons, washing the feet of prisoners, and his message of mercy and inclusion is also offering you encouragement and strength to carry out your important ministry. Let me express my gratitude to Karen Clifton of the Catholic Mobilizing Network and to my brother bishops, the priests, deacons, religious, and laity for their commitment to this apostolate – a true work of mercy.

In the reading today from Acts of the Apostles, we heard how the Gospel was preached not only to the Jews but also to the Greeks at Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians. No one was to be excluded from the consoling words of the Gospel – words which offer hope and mercy. Even amid obstacles – the early Church was persecuted – the Gospel went forth!

The Holy Father wants a Church that is missionary – that goes forth to the spiritual and existential peripheries. In your ministry that might mean going into a prison or jail; visiting with families of those incarcerated; or helping someone reintegrate into society after release. No one is to be excluded from the embrace of the Word of Life. The greatest gift we can offer to those at the margins is the gift of faith in Christ Jesus. Our efforts remind them that God has not forgotten them.

Of course, we face obstacles – hardness of heart; harsh and unfair judgments; despair; physical and spiritual tiredness, as well as a web of bureaucracy. It is important to remember that the Spirit of God animated the works of those scattered by persecution, and that same Spirit lives in the Church today. Saint Luke recounts that *the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.*

When the Church in Jerusalem heard about the success of the mission in Antioch, they sent Barnabas there. Despite being very rooted in their traditions, the Church in Jerusalem showed a mature sense of openness to what God was planning to bring the Gospel to those in darkness. In that sense, they were a Church engaged in discernment. This requires an openness to the Spirit of God for the sake of the mission and may demand conversion, even of structures and ways of doing things. This openness bore fruit in the evangelization of the Gentiles. As you continue your discernment, pray constantly for the guidance of the Spirit. The Holy Father constantly emphasizes the need for deeper and continuing *pastoral conversion* for the sake of mission. This conversion is evermore necessary as your apostolate concretely touches the lives of individuals who have been forgotten, discarded, or who face enormous challenges.

The Apostles sent Barnabas to Antioch. *He rejoiced and encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord in firmness of heart. Barnabas was a good man, filled with the Holy Spirit and faith.* In fact, his name means “son of encouragement.” We might ask ourselves: Am I a son or

daughter who encourages others – even in dark situations? Do I offer words of encouragement to my co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord, or am I one of those people who only criticizes, pointing out problems?

Barnabas, a son of encouragement, was relentless in his mission, going as far as Tarsus to bring Saul with him for the mission, even before their first missionary journey. Again, we can ask: Am I that relentless and committed to the mission?

In his recent exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, the Holy Father wrote:

Yet there are times when we are tempted to relegate pastoral engagement or commitment in the world to second place, as if these were “distractions” along the path to growth in holiness and interior peace. We can forget that “life does not have a mission, but is mission.” (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018)

It was *in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians*. The word preached by Barnabas and Paul had the power to unite in faith all those who became disciples of the Risen Lord. In a sense, they exercised the office of shepherding God’s people. In the Gospel, Jesus, who has gone up to the Temple for the Feast of the Dedication, presents Himself as the One sent by the Father. His works testify to his being sent. Do our works of mercy, the witness of our life, testify to the Merciful Father and to Jesus, the Good Shepherd?

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gives us the example of searching for the lost and forgotten; of calling them by name and reminding them that they belong to His flock. *My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish*. Yes, the Good Shepherd inspires us to also look out for the sheep and to offer them hope, even when we cannot immediately see the way forward.

Even in the darkest situations, the Good Shepherd searches for the sheep. He seeks to bring them mercy and justice. God can create justice in a way that we cannot conceive, but which can begin to be grasped through faith. Just as death does not have the last word thanks to the Lord’s Cross and Resurrection, so too we offer hope for those in prisons and jails; those on death row; their families and victims; there is hope in Christ the Good Shepherd of undoing past suffering, making reparation, setting things right, and living anew – seeking, above all, eternal life.

In sharing in the ministry of Christ the Good Shepherd, our words and deeds should convey to those at the margins that there is a place for them and that they belong to God. Jesus says: *“No one can take them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father’s hand.”*

The task remains for us, open to the Spirit, to discover new ways, better ways of offering justice, hope, and mercy to those at the spiritual and existential peripheries. As believers, we have hope in the presence of the Risen Lord, and as Saint Paul says, *“hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”* (Rom 5:5)