

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
FOR THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH
MANY, LOUISIANA
JUNE 27, 2021**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to this country, I wish to assure you of Pope Francis' paternal affection, spiritual closeness, and heartfelt congratulations on this milestone in the life of your parish, its 150th anniversary, during which you honor the memory of Father François LeVézouët, the first priest to minister here. With apostolic zeal, he left his own country to be a missionary and was a model of charity, even to the point of death, during the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1873. I am particularly happy to be here, because he hailed from Brittany, my part of France. I thank your pastor, Father Francis Kamau, and your Bishop, His Excellency Francis Malone, for their kind invitation.

In this Sunday's Gospel, Saint Mark presents us with two miraculous healings that Jesus performs in favor of two women: the daughter of Jairus, a leading synagogue official, and a woman who suffered from hemorrhage. Both miracles have two levels of interpretation – the purely physical – Jesus bends down to meet human suffering and heals the body – and the spiritual – Jesus heals the human heart and offers salvation, which demands faith.

When Jesus heard that the daughter of Jairus was dead, He said to Jairus, "Do not be afraid; have faith!" Jesus went to the place where the girl was and said: "Little girl, I say to you: Get up!" She promptly got up and walked around. She was cured, not by her merits, virtue, or power, but by God's grace.

In the story of the hemorrhaging woman, we see how Jesus liberates the whole person. Here the miracle takes place in two phases: the first is the physical healing, but this is closely tied to deeper healing, because of the woman's faith. She was open to Christ in faith, and God, being generous with His grace, bestowed it. Jesus said: "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace, and be healed of your disease".

These two healing miracles invite us to overcome a purely materialistic view of life. I think this is what made the pandemic difficult for so many. Everything depended on finding a vaccine, and many, without much of a spiritual life, saw their material projects, their financial endeavors, and their athletic and academic plans vanish. The lockdowns and progressive isolation were just too much for some.

Others had faith, but it needed to be deepened. Often, we ask God to solve our problems and to relieve our concrete sufferings. As Catholics, we naturally do this, learning to depend on God. During the recent pandemic, we asked God to bring healing to the suffering and courage to those who ministered to them, especially to healthcare providers who often acted heroically. This is right, but did we ask for a stronger faith or for the grace of perseverance? Where was our faith or our hope, even when our prayers were not immediately answered?

In the hemorrhaging woman, we see someone who had suffered for twelve years, yet she persevered, and thought, "If I could just touch Him, I could get well." She recognized Jesus as the One who renews our lives. Through her act of faith and that of the synagogue official, we learn to have a firm trust in His love, in His providence that does not abandon us.

We see this also in the life of Father François LeVézouët, who served his parish. He left his native France and his comforts to be a missionary to bring the sacraments and the Gospel to the people of Louisiana. He left his “comfort zone” to find “the surest and shortest path to heaven”, heroically ministering to the sick and dying during the Yellow Fever epidemic. He made sure that Father Louis Gergaud, who had also administered the sacraments to two dying priests, had the last sacraments, and, at great risk to himself, Father LeVézouët made sure that the faithful had access to the sacraments. Never were they deprived of Christ, especially in the Blessed Sacrament. God does not abandon us!

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was attentive to human suffering and reminds us of the need to accompany those who are suffering to carry their crosses, and in particular physicians. Certainly, this is the legacy which Father LeVézouët has left to you, the parishioners of St. John the Baptist. In the modern day, emerging from the pandemic, we must express our gratitude to health care professionals and those who provide pastoral care in nursing homes.

Beyond the clergy and healthcare professionals, who often act as “reserves of love,” which bring peace and hope to the suffering, there are the multitude of lay faithful, who animated by the love flowing from the Heart of Christ, continue to learn from Jesus who is “meek and humble of heart”. There is a formation of the heart which occurs in the homes of your parish and an education of the heart which takes place on one’s knees in this parish church, which helps you to develop a “heart that sees” where compassion is needed and to act.

Father LeVézouët was your first priest, but his story goes on. While we hope and pray that one day he and the other “Shreveport martyrs” are raised to the glory of the altars, his story lives on in you – the people of the parish he founded. The Church is the presence of Christ in the human reality, and it will be your task as heirs to a noble patrimony to remind those around you that God does not abandon them.

We also give thanks to all those who have made sacrifices through the years so that you may have faith. In the Gospel, it is not just that Jesus drew near to Jairus’ daughter or the woman with the hemorrhages; rather, the synagogue official and the woman drew near also to Jesus. The parish is the place of encounter between God and man, and it is my sincere hope that this encounter which “opens up new horizons and gives our lives a decisive direction” will continue to happen in this parish for years to come!