

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST SACRED HEART OF JESUS
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, I greet you in the name of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, and express His closeness to all of you, as today we celebrate this Solemnity of the closeness of Christ to us. Today is also the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests. I thank all the priests gathered here today for their service of God and of His Holy people.

In our first reading, from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, God promises to shepherd his flock. His appointed shepherds had not done the job; they had shepherded themselves. Thus, the Lord says, *“I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest, says the Lord GOD. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy, shepherding them rightly.”*

We see the compassion that God has for His people, whom He senses have been worn down, who are tired from being separated, who long to not dwell where it is cloudy and dark. Last November, the Holy Father addressed Catholic physicians, who were worn down by the pandemic. He invited them to contemplate once more the Heart of Christ, using three words, which can also be useful for the renewal of our own vocation: memory, passion, and consolation.

Memory: To remember means to return *to* the heart or to return *with* the heart. But to what? Pope Francis answers this way:

“To what He did for us: the Heart of Christ shows us Jesus who offers Himself; it is the compendium of His mercy... It comes naturally to us to remember his goodness, which is freely given, which can neither be bought nor sold; and, unconditional, it does not depend on our actions.” (HOMILY ON THE OCCASION OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INAUGURATION OF THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY AT THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF THE SACRED HEART, NOVEMBER 5, 2021)

Frequently, we need to return to Christ Himself to understand that He gives Himself to us freely and unconditionally, especially in the Eucharist. He is the Good Shepherd who leads us to those verdant pastures where we find repose. It is by resting in the arms of the Good Shepherd, by resting upon His breast, upon His Sacred Heart, that we actually have time to remember – to recall and to make present – His love for us.

Without this constant remembrance of His Presence, amid the “haste of a thousand errands and continuous worries”, we will run dry, or as Pope Francis puts it, “Without memory, one loses one’s roots, and without roots, one does not grow.”

Specifically, we need to remember, as Paul points out in the letter to the Romans, which we heard as our second reading, that *the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For Christ, while we were still helpless, died at the appointed time for the ungodly.* He did this through no merit of ours, but simply because He loved us.

The Holy Father also speaks of a need to “cultivate among ourselves *the art of remembering*, of treasuring the faces we meet. It is easy to remember the criticisms we receive, but do we remember, with gratitude, those who have touched our lives? Do we also have an appreciation for the gratitude of those whose lives we have touched? Do we give thanks to God for those privileged moments?

Passion. The second word proposed by the Holy Father is passion. To have passion is not merely a warm, affective feeling; rather in contemplating the Heart of Christ, Pope Francis reminds us that it is a “heart wounded with love, torn open for us on the cross... Pierced, He gives; in death, He gives us life... it shows us how much suffering our salvation cost” (IBID.)

The Pierced Heart of Christ reveals what God the Father is passionate about: us. Closeness, tenderness and compassion are needed in the members of the Church, whether priest, deacon, religious, or lay. Why? They are needed precisely because this is the style of God. The compassionate style of God, according to the Holy Father, suggests that:

“If we really want to love God, we must be passionate about humanity, about all humanity, especially those who live in the condition in which the Heart of Jesus was manifested, that is, pain, abandonment and rejection, especially in this throwaway culture that we live in today.” (IBID.)

In the Gospel, from the fifteenth chapter of Luke, we hear the story of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the lost one. He will not “throw away” even one! He will not let one be lost. That is how valuable each person is to God. In that same chapter, we also hear the story of the woman who sweeps the whole house to find the lost coin, and, of course, the story of the Prodigal Son. These parables of God’s mercy demonstrate how relentless the Heart of God is to each of us – how much He longs to embrace us with mercy and compassion.

Comfort. The third word is comfort. By comfort, the Holy Father really means consolation. Consolation, he says, “indicates a strength that does not come from us, but from those who are with us: that is where strength comes from.”

Do you draw your strength from Jesus, who is God-with-us? Jesus, before He sent His disciples forth to proclaim repentance and to cast out demons and to heal the sick, first summoned His disciples to be with Him. The Beloved Disciple was privileged to lean on Jesus’ breast, close to His Sacred Heart, at the Last Supper. Amid the anxieties of life, amid the violence of war, amid high inflation and rising food costs, amid personal doubts, even about our vocation, do we lean on Him?

While it is true that we are called to console one another and even to console the Heart of Jesus for offenses against Him, do we allow ourselves, not in a selfish way but in a healthy way, to be still and to be consoled by Him? To say that I need to be consoled is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a sign of humility.

Without consolation, we could easily be discouraged whether it is by frustration in our projects, the sheer amount of work placed upon us, the burdens of age or health, or even the negative news about priests. The Holy Father writes:

“We could become discouraged. That is why we need *consolation*. The Heart of Jesus beats for us, always repeating those words: ‘Courage. Courage. Do not be afraid! I am here! ... do not lose heart. The Lord your God is greater than your ills. He takes you by the hand and caresses you. He is close to you. He is compassionate. He is tender. He is your comfort.’ (IBID.)

Without this experience in our own lives, how could we expect to offer these words to anyone else? I conclude by simply inviting you to contemplate the love of the Heart of Christ for you, a love which surpasses human understanding. The Heart of Christ offers us a model as to how to live our vocations – with the style of God – with closeness, tenderness, generosity, and true passion. The Heart of Christ is a burning furnace of charity; may ours be as well.