

LENTEN DAY OF REFLECTION
OFFERED BY
HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ST. MARY'S SEMINARY, BALTIMORE
MARCH 27, 2019

I am very happy to be here at St. Mary's Seminary for this Lenten Day of Reflection. I want to thank your Rector, Father Phillip Brown, and the Director of Spiritual Formation, Father Lawrence Terrien, for their kind invitation to be with you. Today, there will be two conferences: one in the morning, which will focus on our vocation and our encounter with Christ and one in the afternoon which will focus on the story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well and its implication for our mission as priests of the Church and in the Church. In the early afternoon, there will also be the opportunity to receive the sacrament of reconciliation. The day will conclude with the celebration of Mass.

Introduction: Here I am, Lord. Send me! – The Mission of one who is sent

I want to begin with the sixth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah:

In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, a with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they hovered. One cried out to the other: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory!"

At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook and the house was filled with smoke. Then I said, "Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding an ember which he had taken with tongs from the altar. He touched my mouth with it. "See," he said, "now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged."

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" "Here I am," I said; "send me!" And he replied: Go and say to this people: Listen carefully, but do not understand! Look intently, but do not perceive!

Make the heart of this people sluggish, dull their ears and close their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and their heart understand, and they turn and be healed.

"How long, O Lord?" I asked.

And he replied: Until the cities are desolate, without inhabitants, Houses, without people, and the land is a desolate waste. Until the LORD sends the people far away, and great is the desolation in the midst of the land. If there remain a tenth part in it, then this in turn shall be laid waste; As with a terebinth or an oak whose trunk remains when its leaves have fallen. Holy offspring is the trunk.

I chose this passage, not only because you are seminarians, who, like Isaiah, will be sent to God's people with a prophetic message and often will think of your own unworthiness to be given such a gift and a task, but I also chose this passage because you may be asking a question, which many of the lay faithful are asking, especially in the face of so many crises in the Church: *How long, O Lord?*

Each day we read stories in the newspapers or online about the abuse scandal, about how the Church is declining, how she is already a smaller and less powerful Church. We are regularly reminded about fallen-away Catholics and about the rise of the "nones". On the surface it appears that the Church's enemies are growing stronger, and we wonder: *How long, O Lord?* But, it is precisely at this time, that God has called you to something great.

In this passage from Isaiah, we see a strong connection between vocation and mission. Isaiah has a powerful and mysterious encounter with God. It is at the same time wonderful and terrifying. It is full of light and wonder, but it is terrifying, because the prophet recognizes his own littleness and sinfulness in the presence of the grandeur and majesty of the heavenly court. Conscious of his own misery he says, "My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

His encounter with the Lord is more powerful than all of his weakness. God sends one of the seraphim to purify and cleanse the lips of Isaiah, making him fit for mission. The encounter with the Lord is life-changing. We see the outpouring of the mercy of God upon Isaiah, who will become a servant of His Word. Suddenly, a new way of life takes shape in Isaiah, and his heart is set ablaze to love in a new way.

The Lord asks, "*Whom should I send?*" Immediately, Isaiah, who had only just moments before recognized his own unworthiness, promptly says, "*Here I am. Send me!*"

Then God gives him an initial mission: *Go and say to this people: Listen carefully, but do not understand! Look intently, but do not perceive! Make the heart of this people sluggish, dull their ears and close their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and their heart understand, and they turn and be healed.*

It seems a lot like our mission, as we are sent to people who originated in very Christian and Catholic cultures, but who have rejected their heritage and traditions in favor of the latest trends or in favor of no religion whatsoever. The people of Isaiah's time and of our time are not unlike the many to whom Jesus was sent in the Gospel; there, the mercy of God was before their eyes and His Word was in their ears, but it passed right through them because of the hardness of their hearts. They became progressively more stubborn to his invitations to conversion.

All of this hardness of heart, dullness of hearing, closing of eyes, and incomprehension of hearts led Isaiah to ask: "*How long, O Lord?*" To which, the Lord replied: "*Until the cities are desolate, without inhabitants, Houses, without people, and the land is a desolate waste. Until the LORD sends the people far away, and great is the desolation in the midst of the land. If there remain a tenth part in it, then this in turn shall be laid waste; As with a terebinth or an oak whose trunk remains when its leaves have fallen. Holy seed is its stump.*"

Pope Francis has a dream for Christ's Church – that it would be a missionary Church. He writes:

I dream of a "missionary option", that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 27)

I think that this passage from Isaiah brings to light a great rule for every Christian missionary vocation: the missionary does not have to be preoccupied with the number of persons that can be reached or who will respond, but rather with the truth of the experience proposed in its *essentiality* and *depth*. These are the characteristics of the “holy seed” God speaks of to Isaiah.

Essentiality means being concerned with that which is necessary—to the life of the person. The “holy seed” appears as a barren stump, without leaves or fruit; the leaves and fruit will come when God wills it, but everything must be absolutely centered on what really matters (cf. Mt 10:9-10) – the proclamation, the kerygma, the person. The rest is in God’s hands and will flourish according to His plan and His will. *Depth* is important too, because the stump or trunk is ready to renew the whole tree, beginning from the roots.

Just as God sent Isaiah as a missionary to begin this renewal and to offer comfort to the people during the time of exile, so too two thousand years ago, He sent His only-begotten Son into the world. Jesus, in turn, gathered to Himself the Twelve, His Apostles, and sent them. Why did the Father send His Son? Why did Jesus send the Twelve? Because God had compassion on His people. He did not wish them to die or to remain permanently desolate; rather, He wanted to renew them with His mercy. In every age, God calls and sends.

At the conclusion of His great Sermon on the Mount, at the end of the ninth chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel, Christ looks out at the vast crowd and has compassion because they were like sheep without shepherds. He not only asks the disciples to “pray that the Lord of the harvest would send more laborers into this harvest”, but, in the tenth chapter, he calls the Twelve to Himself and gives them authority to preach, teach, and heal in His Name and to proclaim, “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” He sends them to the lost sheep – to those worn out from a lack of guidance from their leaders; to those who wander through the grass hungering for something to eat but finding nothing that will really satisfy them; to those longing for true drink but who are forced to imbibe that which never quenches their thirst.

In the end, He is the One who is the true Shepherd. He is the Bread of Life, who fills us so that we never hunger. He is the Living Water, so that we will never thirst again. But it is He who calls us together to bear His Presence in the world and to the world. He does not call us only as individuals, but He calls us, rather, to be together in this mission, to be rooted in our Tradition and to be rooted in the tree that is the Church, a tree that receives its life-giving nourishment from Him. He calls us, and He sends us – even in the face of opposition and division. He sends us with His authority and power, in His Name – to be a sign of Him – an Event who provokes the flock to seek that which will truly satisfy their hunger and quench their thirst.

It is true we can feel overwhelmed with the size of our mission – the task that lies ahead – but we cannot let the immensity of the task lead us into the self-fulfilling prophecy of failing. The greatest mistake a missionary can make – and you are missionaries – is failing to recognize the confidence that Jesus brings into our lives. We cannot live in an exaggerated fear of the world or the future; rather, we must recognize that *perfect love casts out all fear*. God loves us. He has called us. He has a genuine affection for us. He knows the details and intimacies of our lives. He is familiar with our affections and personalities – even when we ourselves lack this awareness. He comes to us in our humanity and calls us to declare ourselves for him and His mission.

Encounter and Affection for our Humanity

We can only do so if we have an authentic encounter with Him. Pope Benedict XVI says, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas*

Est, 25 December 2005, 1).

Jesus is that event, that person, but have we had such an encounter with Him? I think many have not had such an encounter, because they do not yet have an awareness of their own humanity. He meets us in our humanity and in our circumstances of life. It is there that He offers His grace, which builds upon our nature and perfects it. If we are serious about transmitting the faith, then we must help others discover their own humanity, which necessarily means being serious about discovering our own.

Today, faith is often reduced. Sometimes it is reduced to the religious sense; that is, it is lived as a possible hypothesis by which we face daily situations and problems, as if Christ's breaking into history isn't certain for us. The "encounter" with Christ is not really life-changing; it's not experienced as something "real". The starting point in the search for solutions to the problem is the unknown, rather than from a Presence of something real.

Just as common is the reduction of faith to ethics, morality or culture. Faith is reduced to defending certain values from a previously Christian culture that has disappeared or is rapidly disappearing. We defend values, but often without reference to Him, His Presence, or His profound love. In this post-Christian culture, it is not only faith that is reduced; even our humanity is reduced to our biological, psychological and sociological impulses.

Occasionally, faith is reduced to sentiment. Instead of recognizing the Presence whom we have encountered, faith is conceived as sentiment or feeling, an almost irrational act of the will. It is not something that can be verified. Young people fall into the trap of thinking that reason isn't involved in the journey of faith.

Sometimes people no longer believe or believe without really believing, that is, they practice in a purely formalistic or ritualistic way or in an overly moralistic way. The faith seems more dead than alive, because they aren't living their own humanity or aren't sufficiently committed to their own humanity and to an awareness of their own humanity. It is precisely this that is the condition for being ready when Christ offers Himself to us through an Encounter.

By "commitment to one's own humanity" or "having an affection for oneself", I don't mean in an egotistical or self-referential way. Rather affection for self means being surprised at not being made by yourself and being in awe and wonder of how one is made and pondering by Whom one is made. There is surprise and wonder at not being made by ourselves. Affection for self leads to the seriousness of gazing at one's own needs and lamenting when they are not met. Affection for self requires having a true sense of poverty of spirit, or to quote the Beatitudes, having a "hunger and thirst for righteousness." Even Zacchaeus, a wealthy man, experienced Jesus' gaze upon him, which made him recognize his needs and his value. His deeply human needs (and his awareness of them) led him to hurry down from the sycamore tree to welcome Jesus.

Whether it is the need for love, personal fulfillment, friendship and companionship – those needs which young people say they have – unless young people are guided to take these needs seriously, they won't come to an authentic faith. In contrast, those who have these needs and acknowledge them have an expectant waiting for something – something that is outside of themselves; they are open to the Infinite. Their awareness of and affection for their own humanity is awakened by a gaze of love upon them – a gaze cast not only by the Lord but also by those who accompany them on their journey.

It is the witness of a humanity changed by the Lord that has the capacity to offer a coherent testimony to others, which helps them understand that they have value. The gaze provokes a wonder in

them that leads them to ask questions about what will satisfy their aspirations, the desires of their hearts, including the desire for truth, beauty, and goodness. The personal witness and the gaze of love, especially from those who have had their own humanity changed by an encounter with Christ, will allow others to also gaze at themselves with tenderness rather than self-hatred and loathing. It is we, who accompany the flock, who can cast this gaze and awaken them to the possibilities that faith offers – a faith which comes to them in their own humanity.

There is a temptation to provide the faithful with all the answers to life's problems, based on our life or faith experiences or based on the *Catechism*, and yet, the question is an anthropological one. Chesterton wrote: "They say that the wise don't see the answer to the riddle of reason. The problem is not that the wise don't see the answer. It's that the wise don't see the riddle." (G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Barnes and Noble, reprint 2004), 24).

Christ is the Answer. What is the Question?

Christ is the answer, but if we don't perceive the question (of our humanity), how can we understand the answer? This is the challenge – modern people have lost a sense of their own humanity and with it a sense of the Infinite, a sense of Mystery. The priest, by his witness and by his efforts of accompanying his flock, assists them in discovering their own humanity by provoking questions: What is the meaning of existence? Why is there pain and death? Why is life worth living? What is True? Good? Beautiful? What does reality consist of and for what is it made?

The men and women of our day must be guided to engage reality – to engage life and to ask these questions. It is not for us to pre-determine the questions or their answers. They must engage reality. Unless they ask these sorts of questions, they will never encounter the answer: Christ.

The starting point, therefore, is not an argument about what they should or should not believe but a gaze, like the gaze which Jesus cast upon the Apostles when he first called them and constituted them, that communicates to the person that they are valued and an awareness that each person must follow a path just as we had to.

These days many people, but especially the young, are critical and ask questions, not only the existential questions but also about particular dimensions of the faith. For our part, we accompany them by adhering more faithfully to the Tradition, against which they can, through experience and their encounter with us, test the coherence of the Catholic Faith and verify its truths through reason, faith, and their personal encounter with Christ. Thus, they will learn to accept responsibility, use their freedom, and become protagonists in their future.

As the people entrusted to our care ask these questions, make discoveries, and learn to responsibly use their freedom, they do have an expectation of something from the ministers of the Gospel: coherence. God alone is perfect. We are not, nor do our people expect us to be perfect. Nevertheless, they do expect that there would be a correspondence between the faith we profess with our lips and our lives and actions. If we are not rooted ourselves in the faith, which flows from the personal encounter with Christ, and thereby offer poor witness, then the coherence of the Faith as a whole will appear to fall apart. We will do damage to the mission.

As leaders, we must use our authority wisely to mediate the Presence of the One from whom we have our authority. God and the Church call us to help the holy People of God to discern their true good as we accompany them, listening to and taking them seriously. This process demands time, effort and patience, but the investment is worth it.

In addition to coherent, authoritative witnesses, the proposal of the Catholic Faith needs to be attractive. This is God's method: He chooses a person or persons to attract others. We invite others to follow, promising them that they will experience the positive change in their lives that we have had in knowing Christ intimately. We invite them to actually get on the road and to commit themselves to walking the journey (with us). That is, we offer them signs and reminders of His Presence that provoke the person to continue the journey and to ask still more questions. In the course of the journey, the person will have to verify whether the Faith corresponds to his or her heart's desire. They will have to ask questions and to reflect. This involves, on our part, taking a risk – the risk of freedom.

And yet, this is exactly the method of Jesus. He attracts with His Person. He engages others in their humanity, provoking more questions and inviting them to begin the path of discipleship and to verify whether His promises are true, whether they satisfy the deepest longings of the heart. He invites them to make a decisive choice to belong to Him – to commit to Him.

The Method of the True Missionary: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well.

To illustrate this, I would like to reflect with you on the story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well, from the Fourth Chapter of St. John's Gospel. If you were at a parish this weekend, especially one where there were people in the RCIA had to undergo the First Scrutiny, then you heard this Gospel.

The encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan Woman at the Well is beautiful, simple, and profoundly human, and it helps me to understand my own vocation. I chose the words from it as my episcopal motto: *If you knew the gift of God*. In this encounter, the Samaritan Woman has a spiritual and existential "block", but Jesus, through his merciful gaze and through dialogue, gradually opens her eyes and heart to recognize what will make her truly happy. The encounter with Jesus removes her shame and satisfies her thirst for joy, transforming her way of life. A horizon to a new way of living is opened. The encounter revealed everything that had been hidden deep within her – her own humanity. Strengthened and converted by her encounter and with a deeper affection for her own humanity, she could become a protagonist in her future, witnessing to others that she had found in Him the Messiah.

With the story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well, I want to describe the idea of conversion as an encounter with and recognition of the Other – that is of Christ, of the Presence of the God of Mercy. The Gospel of John is filled with life-changing "encounters". In the first chapter, John the Baptist points Jesus out as the Lamb of God, and his two disciples followed Jesus, who asks them, "What do you seek?" Already, the Savior is trying to awaken in them an awareness of their hearts' deepest desires.

In turn, the disciples asked Him, "Master, where do you stay?" He answered, "Come and See." They spent the whole day with Him and they remembered their first encounter; it was about four in the afternoon. Immediately, changed by the encounter, Andrew told his brother Simon, "We have found the Messiah." They had encountered the Presence- someone truly exceptional, who made them even leave John the Baptist – by the power of His voice, by His Presence, by the hope He offered.

In the third chapter, Jesus encounters Nicodemus, a scholar of the Law, a good Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Yet, there was something missing from his life. Jesus' dialogue with Him would lead to his slow conversion. In that dialogue, Jesus revealed: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but shall have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world but to save the world through Him.*" Nicodemus would only gradually recognize the meaning of these words, but his initial encounter with Jesus was the event for revealing this truth to the whole world. It was the encounter that opened the door to hope. Everything else would follow.

But there are some obvious differences between Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus and his encounter in chapter four with the Samaritan Woman at the Well. Nicodemus came at night; she meets Jesus during the day. Nicodemus was prominent Jew, a member of the Sanhedrin; this woman was a Samaritan and was impoverished. Nicodemus was a moral person, who kept the Law; she was a sinner who had five husbands and was now with a sixth man. All this reveals something about Jesus: He is willing to meet with anyone – whenever and wherever. There is always the possibility of a life-changing encounter.

Jesus is journeying through Samaria. He is going to the "peripheries" as Pope Francis might say. God's mercy is relentless. Jesus has journeyed from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north to Samaria just to meet this woman. When Jesus meets her, He is alone, and she is alone; the encounter is a personal one. They meet at Jacob's well. In the mind of a Jew, the setting of the "well" would make someone think of marriage. Abraham's servant met Rebecca at a well and led her to Isaac. Moses too met Zipporah at a well. Now, a woman encounters a Jewish man at a well at the sixth hour. It was as if Jesus desired an encounter – desired to engage this woman's freedom. How things would go would depend on her freedom.

She could simply walk away or she could become a protagonist in history, interested in her own humanity because of Jesus' interest in her.

Certainly, the Samaritan woman did not intend to meet anyone. She was by herself? Where were the other women? Why weren't they drawing water? They had already drawn their water early in the day. This woman came when she thought no one would be at the well. Why? Because she was a public sinner. She had to survive but she didn't want to be seen, didn't want to be judged, and did not want to give an explanation to anyone. She busied herself with activity but had forgotten her own dignity and what it was to be a protagonist in history. She allowed herself to be moved by forces that seemed beyond her control.

But her best plans to avoid an encounter failed. Jesus was there – waiting for her. He, a Jewish man, spoke to her, a Samaritan woman, in public. The love and mercy of God cross barriers and overcome boundaries. God doesn't want distance; He wants to be close – even to sinners.

What is Jesus' approach? He engages her in dialogue. In his humanity, He is tired and thirsty, but His real thirst is for her faith. He asks for a drink, and she refuses. At first, she doesn't really want to talk to Him and points out the difference between them: Jew and Samaritan. Still, she gave Jesus an opening to continue the dialogue. Jesus responds to her rebuff by saying, *"If you knew who it was who was saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and He would have given you life-giving water."*

Addressing him merely as *Sir*, she asks, *"Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob?"* Jesus answers: *"Everyone who drinks from this well will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

At this moment, there is a recognition. The Samaritan woman recognizes that she is dealing with a truly exceptional person, someone willing to speak the Truth. We must think about how many times she came to that well to draw water! She continued to grow thirsty; nothing could satisfy her thirst. We must contemplate how many times she had to carry that jar to the well and how many times back she carried that jar, heavier on her return. No matter how much water she drew, it would never satisfy her deeper thirst – for happiness, for something or someone that corresponded to her heart's deepest desire.

This burden was one that she didn't want to carry any longer. She responded, *"Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."* She recognizes Him as the One who is able to satisfy her thirst for God. In reflecting on this passage, St. Augustine says that the jar represents her concupiscent desire. She has been trying to satisfy her thirst with the things of the earth and has found herself perpetually thirsty, unsatisfied, and frustrated. This was her life – one of pain, misery, loneliness, being used and rejected, and discarded.

It is not entirely unlike our lives. We too have our own jars. We try to cope with our sin, weaknesses, and inadequacies by filling our lives with things we think will satisfy us. For some people it is alcohol, drugs, and pornography; for others it is wealth, power, and the desire for human respect. We will take anything we can to help us feel better, but in the end, it doesn't satisfy. Just as when Jesus was approached by the disciples of John and asked, "What do you seek?" Jesus is now asking the woman to identify her real thirst. The six previous men were unable to satisfy her heart's real desire. Six is an imperfect number; seven, on the other hand, is a perfect, covenantal number. Jesus is the seventh man – the fulfillment of what was lacking in the previous six men and more. He has waited for her – to have this conversation.

But every conversation which we have with Jesus must be an honest one. We cannot really hide the truth from Him. Jesus knows her situation, but she has not yet told Him. Perhaps she feels ashamed.

Jesus says, “*Go, call your husband.*” She answers, “*I have no husband,*” without telling the whole truth. We often do this. We say half-truths to hide our sins and shame, to avoid judgment or accepting responsibility for our actions. She tries to hide, but Jesus desires her faith. He will not let her conversion be partial. He says: “*You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have five husbands and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly.*”

Rather than, out of a false compassion, ignoring the sin and its pain, Jesus exposes what she has done to the light of his truth – not to harm or humiliate but to heal. Now she stands before Him, knowing that He knows. We cannot hide our sins from God. He knows but wants to heal. Naturally, we get defensive when our weaknesses are exposed. We put up our defenses to deflect the “attack”.

That’s exactly what the Samaritan woman does, but something is happening. She now recognizes Jesus as a “prophet.” Not yet ready to accept responsibility for her future, she tries to turn the attention away from her, pointing out the difference between Jews and Samaritans, the former worshiping in Jerusalem and the latter on this mountain. Jesus knows that this is a non-issue. True worship is to worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth. (cf. John 4:23-24). To really worship God is to embrace His Spirit or to allow ourselves to be embraced by his Spirit and to embrace His truth or to allow ourselves to be embraced by the Truth. Anything else is a cheap imitation. Everything else is superficial and won’t permit true healing and fullness of life.

The water which Jesus has promised represents the Holy Spirit, the “gift” par excellence that Jesus came to bring on behalf of God the Father. Whoever is reborn by water and the Holy Spirit enters into a real relationship with God as a son or daughter.

Finally, she says, “*I know the Messiah is coming the One who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will show us all things.*” Led through dialogue, she expresses a desire for the Messiah, the fulfillment of her hopes and dreams – for the Truth who will set her free. She wants to be shown all things – of God’s love and mercy. Jesus says, “*I who speak to you am He.*” There is a recognition. She has gone from calling him sir to calling him a prophet to acknowledging Him as the Messiah.

As the disciples return, the scriptures relate: “*So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?’*” She left her water jar. A miracle has happened – not just the forgiveness of sins or conversion, but the miracle of freedom. She chose to leave behind her old way of life and her old desires and to live in a new way.

Her encounter with an Original Presence led her to discover her own humanity and the possibilities for her future. She who once didn’t want to meet anyone now desired to witness to Christ. This “living in a new way” meant telling others about her encounter.

This leads us to a series of questions: Why does her missionary impulse flow so “naturally” from her encounter with Jesus? Does the encounter with Him provoke us to be missionaries? What is missing if we are not missionaries? The Holy Father calls us to be a “Church that goes forth” – to be missionaries, but this does not mean merely telling others about Jesus; rather, to be a missionary means to be committed to a new way of living – to be a protagonist in our future. Isn’t this really what pastoral conversion is about?

Eventually more Samaritans came to meet Jesus and no longer believed simply because of her testimony, but they heard for themselves and declared that He is “*indeed the Savior of the World.*” It is like Andrew saying to Simon, “*We have found the Messiah.*” The Samaritan Woman, through her witness, awakened in others the desire for happiness and for an encounter Him, who makes all things new.

Listen once again to Pope Benedict: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

Is this not exactly what happened with the Samaritan Woman at the Well? It was not a set of propositions or theological syllogisms or truth that brought about her conversion; it was an encounter with a person. Her encounter with Jesus helped her to see and discern what would truly satisfy and quench her thirst and what could never really satisfy her.

Her encounter helped her to leave behind her burden of sin to witness to Christ. In that sense, the Divine Mercy which she received as a gift was also a summons to evangelize – to create a better future in the history of the world. Her conversation with Jesus was not an easy conversation, but it was a life-changing one. Perhaps, at times, she would have recurrent remembrances of her previous husbands, but these would pale in comparison to the memory of this Event. It is not merely a historical remembrance of what happened on that day, it is a living memory – an ongoing awareness of His Presence – that changed her life and that opened a new horizon – a new way of seeing the world, a new way of living. The Samaritan Woman at the Well was transformed not only into an evangelist but into a witness to Christ and protagonist in history. If it can happen to her, it can also happen to us.

The Priest: Our Humanity and Responsibility

This type of encounter and transformation should happen for every disciple, including the priest, who, although configured to Christ the Head, nevertheless, remains a disciple. The priesthood is a privileged form of Christ’s presence here and now. I do not mean privileged in the sense of power or the clericalism which plagues the Church; rather, I mean privileged in the sense of “friendship” and intimacy with the Lord. Christ had his extraordinary encounter with the Samaritan Woman more than two thousand years ago, but Christ is still alive, present, here among us, and His words, even through you and me, can touch and transform.

The one who follows Christ as a priest has heard his voice as something present – not mere words. The proposal of Christ to us seems more pertinent to our lives than anything else. It is through the attraction to the person of Christ that the priest desires to place himself at the service of the Lord and those whom the Lord loves. Seminary is a “privileged” place to discover this attraction and to nurture this friendship.

There are many ways of serving Christ in His Church, but one of fundamental importance is the proclamation of His Presence, not only through preaching, but also through the gift of the sacraments. With ordination to the priesthood, you will receive an indelible seal upon your soul, which will mark you forever as a servant of God’s mercy for all of humanity. You will begin to speak of Him, to forgive sins in His name, to make present the Sacrament of His Body and Blood; and to educate and form the People of God to also serve Christ and His Kingdom. What could be greater than to serve Christ in this way?

Did you do anything to merit this call? Or rather, is it Christ’s gift to you? It is a “privilege” to be called by Christ, to be loved by Christ, to work by His side, just as the Apostles did, and to love Christ in each person who comes before us. The ministry, if truth be told, is not easy. The priest draws his strength from Jesus’ predilection for him. Yes, Christ loves you in your humanity. Even in times of frustration, persecution, even in seeming failure and loneliness, Christ is not distant; rather, He is near, inviting you to share in His solitude and Passion through which he generates a new humanity.

The path to Christ and to nurturing our friendship with Him, by which our own humanity will be renewed, cannot neglect the context of our world today. Jesus met the Samaritan Woman at the Well during

a time when Jews and Samaritans hated each other. He was mindful of the woman's culture and circumstances, and He adapted his approach to her. We too, if we are to be effective missionaries, must be mindful of the changed context of the proclamation. We live in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to religion. The social context in which we live is highly secularized. The educational and economic environment, which has significant influence over people and their behaviors, is dominated by science and technology, with little room left for God or the life of faith, except as something private that might provide a few noble social values or customs.

The Catholic and Christian culture, certainly the one in which I was raised, is crumbling. But still, the Church goes on; she exists in history. She will need to offer models of life in new ways and to represent Christ and the Gospel in a technological and moral wasteland. But it is the "newness" of the Gospel, borne from the encounter with Christ, that must be felt and experienced. This Church needs leaders, shepherds whose humanity has been changed by the encounter with Christ, who will continue to provoke humanity.

In this way, the Church will continue to exist and grow. The Church – priests, religious, and laity together – can never be reduced to an abstraction; rather, is a gathering or an "accumulation" of persons who are united by a Presence – the Presence. This group of persons includes young and old, rich and poor, European and Latino, and saints and sinners. We are a mixture of flesh and blood, hiddenness and transparency, weakness and greatness – a people, at times, marked by contradictions but beautiful in diversity. But in all of our differences, we have the same end, the same goal: Christ Himself.

Although the Church of my youth cannot be recreated or reproduced, nor would such a thing be healthy in this changed context, Christ gives the Church – in each of her members – the gift of friendship, that is, the gift of each other. I too had to live in a seminary community. I know how difficult it can be putting up with others' challenges and idiosyncrasies. There are always those people who rub us the wrong way or get under our skin, those with whom we disagree. Some, I am sure, are thinking, "Excellency, if we are all gifts to one another, then I think I got a 'gag gift'."

God is calling us, as priests, along with our people, to work together – to recognize the greatness of our call, so that we willingly transform each moment of our day to be moments of His grace, allowing others to be provoked by the same event. Our time becomes His time. Our efforts become His efforts. Our time, even in seminary, is spent to educate our own humanity (and that of those around us), to be an occasion of the revelation of His Presence – of the glory of God in Christ. Silence, study, prayer, conversation, contemplation of nature – all of it – is for His glory, and not in a lackadaisical sort of way but with urgency. We cannot waste anything that the Lord has given us, not even time, nor can we allow the people entrusted to our care to waste what the Lord has given to them. We must provoke and encourage through a revitalization of faith.

Faith must once again become an experience capable of addressing the dimensions of the human heart – an experience that convinces. That is, has our encounter with Christ, so thoroughly convicted us, not only of our sinfulness, but like Isaiah, of the wondrous Mystery of the Godhead. Has our own encounter with Christ as priests/future priests so impacted our humanity that we radiate the joy of the encounter, thereby attracting others? It is not enough to be a priest who simply performs some ritual tasks and in a formal or routine way; rather, the priest must inspire others for the greatness that comes from knowing Jesus. It is the task of a seminary to form men in their own humanity, so that they may engage the humanity of those who encounter them with the joy of the Gospel.

The experience of faith and this engagement, while happening in a deeply personal way, does not happen in isolation or in a vacuum. The tendency for people today, despite our rapid advances in technology with our Smartphones and the internet, is paradoxically to be connected yet alone and lonely. Moreover,

we live in a society that is sharply divided; the media and political systems compound the problem with a “politics of division”, yet Catholics, and, I would say, priests particularly, must have an experience of community life – a place to belong and to share. Community life – life in the Church – teaches us of the need to overcome our radical individualism. While preserving our freedom and assuming our responsibilities, we need to learn dependence upon one another rather than develop a “Lone Ranger” mentality. Cooperating with other priests, deacons, religious, and especially lay men and women is an important part of being a priest and member of the Church.

After all, the priest needs, almost in absolute way, to learn this dependence, because he himself is dependent on that which comes from God. This dependence is expressed in his proclamation of the Gospel *of Jesus Christ*, his celebration of the sacraments *of the Church*, by which grace is mediated, and his education and formation *of the People of God*. Formation, sacramental celebrations and the proclamation of the Gospel are expressions of lived communion. Our humanity, impacted by the encounter with Christ, engages others in the community and draws into deeper communion. The deeper our communion and unity, the more we become a sign of the Presence of Christ and the more people come to believe. After the Ascension, the Great Commission, and Pentecost, the Apostles were sent into the whole world, but they always had a point of reference – their shared communion in Christ.

Finally, the priest, affected by his encounter with Christ, has a responsibility for mission. The Church is constantly tempted to adopt bureaucratic measures and procedures, but do these reflect the encounter and news of Christ or do they simply adopt worldly ways of doing things and worldly attitudes? Near the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Francis said that “What makes obsolete structures pass away, what leads to a change of heart in Christians, is precisely *missionary* spirit.”

Last year, in his exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, he added:

A Christian cannot think of his or her mission on earth without seeing it as a path of holiness, for “this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess 4:3). Each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel.

That mission has its fullest meaning in Christ and can only be understood through him. At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life. It consists in uniting ourselves to the Lord’s death and resurrection in a unique and personal way, constantly dying and rising anew with him. (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018, 19-20).

Holiness is deeply connected to mission. If we are to be an evangelical Church - to be an occasion of the revelation of His Presence - then we priests need to recover a missionary spirit. In our Holy Father’s words this:

“involves setting in a missionary key all the day-to-day activities of the particular churches. Clearly this entails a whole process of reforming ecclesial structures. The ‘change of structures’ will not be the result of reviewing the organizational flow chart, which would lead to a static reorganization; rather, it will result from the very dynamics of mission.” (Pope Francis, Address to the Leadership of CELAM, 28 July 2013)

Only from a paradigmatic choice to be a missionary Church will authentic reform, vital for evangelization, flow. Just as wind pushes against a sail and causes a boat to move upon the water, so too

the Spirit of God pushes the whole Church to go forth into the world, attentive to the signs of the times and the needs of the people, jettisoning that which is obsolete.

As I conclude, I place before you the words of Saint John Paul II: “The Spirit makes the Church a river of new life that flows through human history.” (Pope John Paul II, “L’importanza dei carismi nella Chiesa,” 30 May 1998)

In the present times, what is necessary is openness to the Spirit of God who gives us the courage to personally encounter Christ – in prayer, in the Word, and in the sacraments – and so live differently. It is through this relationship that we are gradually made holy and the Church can more fully be the sacrament of salvation – the sign of His Presence, a reminder that He is with us always, even until the end of time.