

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE**  
**APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**  
**2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 9, 2018**  
**RECEPTION AND VENERATION OF THE RELIC OF ST. JOHN VIANNEY**  
**BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**  
**WASHINGTON, DC**

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am happy to be with you on this Second Sunday of Advent. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to the United States, I want to express the paternal affection and spiritual closeness of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, during this joyful season of Advent. Just three years ago, the Holy Father inaugurated the Jubilee of Mercy. In his letter concluding the Jubilee Year, the Holy Father wrote:

Mercy cannot become a mere parenthesis in the life of the Church; it constitutes her very existence, through which the profound truths of the Gospel are made manifest and tangible. Everything is revealed in mercy; everything is resolved in the merciful love of the Father. (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC LETTER *MISERICORDIA ET MISERA*, 20 NOVEMBER 2016, 1)

The experience of receiving God's mercy begins with attentive listening to God's Word. In Luke's Gospel, we are told that *the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert*. Like the Old Testament prophets, John received the Word of God at a specific historical moment for his prophetic mission to proclaim *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*.

John was preaching and baptizing in the Jordan, but his baptism was different from the Jewish ritual washings which were necessary to enter the Temple. John's baptism was a call to repentance, just as Isaiah had prophesied, "*Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes*" (Is 1:16). Old Testament preaching is summarized by the message of John the Baptist: Convert!

The call to conversion means rethinking our way of doing things; questioning the way we have been living; allowing God's criteria for judgment to prevail over our own, judging, not by the world's standards or public opinion but by the Word of Truth. Conversion means living differently, because we have met the Word, and He has changed us and given us a new way of seeing and doing things. Repentance involves seeing things and people through the eyes of God, seeing not only others' weaknesses but their strengths too. It involves turning from a destructive path to walk along the way of life.

The word of God came to John so that people might experience the newness of life offered by the Word. John rightly understood himself as the *voice of one crying out in the desert*. As in the other Gospels, Luke has John the Baptist reciting Isaiah 40: "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.*" (Is 40:1-3), but Luke's account adds two verses of Isaiah: "*The winding roads shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.* He indicates that God has plan for salvation that is universal in scope – *all flesh* – Jew and Gentile – shall see the salvation of God.

In those days, there had been a great hope among the Jews for Israel's restoration. God had led them from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. When they were in exile in Babylon, there too was hope for restoration. The prophet Baruch echoes this hope: *Up, Jerusalem! Stand upon the heights; look to the east and see your children, gathered from the east and the west at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that they are remembered by God. Led away on foot by their enemies they left you, but God will bring them back to you.*

The Psalmist confirms God's fidelity, writing "*When the Lord brought back the captives of Zion, we were like men dreaming. Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with rejoicing*", but he adds a plea: *Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the torrents in the southern desert.* Indeed, there was hope that God would act again to restore the Davidic kingdom, to reunite the Twelve Tribes, and to bring the Gentiles under God's rule. There was hope for a Messiah who would deliver the people from the Romans.

When John speaks of preparing the way of the Lord, he is referring to this hope. Commenting on the words of John, the Holy Father says:

"It is a pressing invitation to open one's heart and receive the salvation that God offers ceaselessly, almost obstinately, because he wants us all to be free from the slavery of sin. But the text of the prophet amplifies this voice, portending that 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God' (v. 6). And salvation is offered to every man, and every people, without exclusion, to each one of us." (POPE FRANCIS, ANGELUS ADDRESS, 6 DECEMBER 2015)

God's mercy is revolutionary. It is not a political revolution; it is altogether different. With the coming of His Son, God changes the position of the Gentiles from being outsiders to being part of His family. He enlarges the scope of His saving plan. He changes the status of sinners and tax collectors from being outcasts to friends. He will "level the playing field": *Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low*, so that all may walk on the way of justice. From the beginning, with its call to repentance, to its end, with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, St. Luke's Gospel refers to journeying along the way. In between, we hear the stories of the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the unforgettable parable of the Prodigal Son.

In these days too, we are also recalling the appearance of the Holy Virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego. There in the winter, in the desert, roses were blooming – a sign of God's tenderness toward the peoples of the New World! The appearance there would lead to the conversion of an entire continent – a revolution which does not stop!

God invites us to be part of His Revolution. Our work begins by asking Him for the grace of repentance –to make low the mountains of our pride and self-referentiality; to fill in the valleys of our shallowness with virtue; to straighten out our crookedness, hypocrisy, and dishonesty so that we may walk with integrity; and to clear aside the debris that keeps Him at the margins of our life.

The Curé of Ars, whose heart is traveling throughout this country, is a reminder that God uses instruments – his priests – to be ministers of his grace and mercy – to help people to ask for this grace and to change their lives. When I was child, each evening we gathered as a family for prayer; after the family prayer, my parents would read to us. I remember that for some weeks they read to us from Abbé Francois Trochu's biography of St. John Vianney.

I knew the life of the saint quite well, but when I was fifteen years old, we traveled to Ars for a few days during the summer. It was my first visit there. I was impressed by his house, his pulpit, his whole life. At that time, I felt as if I had a vocation, but I didn't know how to go about pursuing it, but I remember stopping to pray before the famous sculpture by Emillen Cabuchet. St. John Vianney has been and remains an attractive figure to me. Why? What did I see there in the image? That image incarnated who he was – a man of prayer.

The saint himself wrote that, "Prayer is nothing else but union with God. When one has a heart that is pure and united with God, he is given a kind of serenity and sweetness that makes him ecstatic, a light that surrounds him with marvelous brightness. In this intimate union, God and the soul are fused together like two bits that no one can ever pull apart. This union of God with a tiny creature is a lovely thing. It is happiness beyond understanding."

I desired this happiness, and he inspired me to seek this deeper union with God. St. John Vianney was not a handsome man. He did not have a beautiful voice. It is well known that he was not too clever or good at studies. Perhaps, for all these reasons, he was sent to Ars, which was the Siberia of Lyons, a destitute village with little left of the faith. After signing his letter of appointment, the Vicar General reportedly said to him, "There is not much love for God in that parish; you will bring some into it."

Indeed, Saint John Vianney brought so much love to it, that a tiny village became the center of the world in just a few short years. What did he offer to the people? Condemnation? Exclusion? Denunciation? What did he offer? Forgiveness. Mercy.

I want to thank the Knights of Columbus for organizing this national pilgrimage of the heart of Saint John Vianney. It offers prophetic witness in a country that does not want to hear about forgiveness or mercy but only wants to condemn and demonize, instead of joining the revolution of mercy. The heart of John Vianney also inspires. Once during an exorcism, the devil cried out, "*Three more like Vianney and our whole kingdom will be ruined.*" Perhaps, there will be three men here – or even more – whom the Lord will raise up to be his faithful priests!

Journeying to his parish for the first time, St. John Vianney was lost along the way, and a little boy named Antoine Givre gave him directions, after which the saint said to him, "My young friend, you have shown me the way to Ars; I shall show you the way to heaven!"

John the Baptist and John Vianney knew that there was only one way to heaven – the way of the Lord Jesus. Inspired by them, may we *prepare the way of the Lord and make straight his paths.*