

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR THE EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
WITH RECITATION OF THE ROSARY FOR POPE FRANCIS
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, D.C. – MARCH 2, 2025**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Not only do I wish to convey to you the Holy Father’s spiritual closeness; but I also thank you, on his behalf, for your prayers for him during this time of infirmity. We are united with him through this Eucharistic offering of Christ; and I know that many of you will remain after this Mass to pray the rosary for him. As you know, Pope Francis has deep affection for Our Lady, and he values the maternal care that she has always expressed to him.

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In the daily reports about the Pope’s health, there is a simple phrase that has been repeated, which we might pass over easily. It is said, “he remains in good spirits”. As simple as that statement is, the Word of God for today’s Mass would suggest that there is actually quite a bit of meaning in such a statement. We heard in Psalm 92, the responsorial Psalm: “The just...shall bear fruit even in old age; vigorous and sturdy shall they be, declaring how just is the Lord, my rock, in whom there is no wrong.”¹

To declare that Pope Francis is in good spirits, then, is to remind us of the faith and confidence in God that he carries within him. To be sure, the Holy Father’s body, 88 years old and beset with many infirmities, is not “vigorous and sturdy”; that’s not what the Psalmist is talking about. But his *spirit*: that is what remains vigorous! It is the spirit, the *inner self*, which allows the Pope “to proclaim [the Lord’s] kindness at dawn and [His] faithfulness throughout the night”—to use again the words of the Psalm.²

¹ *Psalm* 92: 13a, 15-16.

² *Psalm* 92: 2-3.

This is like what Saint Paul declares to the Corinthian Christians, and to us, in the second reading when he says: “Brothers and sisters: When this which is mortal”—by which he means our human body—“clothes itself with immortality, then...Death is swallowed up in victory. [...] Therefore,” Paul continues, be...always devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”³

In those daily reports about the Pope, we sometimes hear that he “resumed his work”. Again, a simple phrase, but actually quite indicative of what motivates Pope Francis. To use the words of Paul, the Holy Father is “always devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that [his] labor is not in vain”.

We give to the Pope many exalted titles: Successor of Peter, Supreme Pontiff, Vicar of Christ... . But Francis himself would want us to remember his most basic identity: he is a Christian. He is a person who has had an encounter with Christ which has changed him; and that encounter makes him a witness to the Gospel of Christ. When Francis was asked at the beginning of his Pontificate, “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” he answered, “I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.”⁴

That will always be the primary witness that the Pope can give us—*any* Pope. The one whom we call our “holy father” is the one who, in virtue of his Baptism, his ordination, his election to the papacy, and his personal walk with Christ, stands in the midst of his fellow Christians—in the midst of all the children of God on earth—and shows by his life: *This is what it means to belong to Christ. ... This is what it means to be marked by the death and the resurrection of Jesus.*

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And so, we pray for the Pope. But we don’t finish there; we pray for ourselves. No less than the Pope, each of us called to live from a personal encounter with Christ. Each of us, “a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon”, is called to show to others what it means to be marked by the mystery of the Lord’s death and resurrection. To

³ Cf. *1 Corinthians* 15: 54-58.

⁴ Cf. Interview with Pope Francis by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., 30 September 2013.

do what was sung in the verse before the Gospel reading: “Shine like lights in the world as you hold on to the word of life.”⁵

If we do this—like the Holy Father has tried to do it—then we can be sure that, as Jesus says in the Gospel, we will bear good fruit. The fruit comes, not from our own strength, but from a *heart* which God has filled with his own love and grace. Francis has described the human heart as “a core that lies hidden beneath all outward appearances”.⁶ It is that place deep within us where Christ and his word can penetrate, can light a fire for the Gospel, and can make us living witnesses to the risen Lord in our midst.

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As we prepare now to share in the Eucharist, let us bring to this celebration everything that God has done through our encounter with him. And let us become even more aware of the presence of the risen Christ.

⁵ *Philippians* 2:15d, 16a.

⁶ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos* on the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ, 24 October 2024, 4.