

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
OPENING MASS OF 40 HOURS DEVOTION (THURSDAY OF THE 3RD WEEK OF LENT)
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, D.C. – MARCH 27, 2025**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Before reflecting with you on the word of God, I would like to thank you, on behalf of the Holy Father Pope Francis, for the prayers that you have continued to offer for him. He knows that he has been “lifted up” by your offering, and we are grateful for the progress that he has made. Please know that you are spiritually united to him, especially those of you who are feeling the weight of sickness.

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In the responsorial Psalm, we have sung together these words:

“If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.”¹

These words also form one of the antiphons for the Liturgy of the Hours during Lent. It is fitting that we pray these words, because Lent is a season to soften our hearts once again: to open our hearts anew to the word of God.

All of us need this renewal of heart. We are familiar with the attitude that the prophet Jeremiah confronts in today’s first reading. God said to His people, “Listen to my voice”... “But they obeyed not, nor did they pay heed. They walked in the hardness of their evil hearts and turned their backs, not their faces, to me.”² It is easy to see examples of this “hardness of heart” in our present society. An arrogance. A self-referential vision based on one’s own ideas, which refuses to listen to those who offer a different or contrasting perspective. Each of us, if we are not listening for the voice of God, can be tempted to form a “hard heart”.

Thankfully, Jesus teaches us to have a heart open to God and to others. In his encyclical on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Pope Francis says that the human heart is

¹ *Psalm 95:8.*

² *Jeremiah 7:23-25.*

the place within us that is capable of “uniting the fragments”.³ He means that if we enter into our hearts, where God awaits us,⁴ a unity can be realized. Both a unity of the fragments *within ourselves*, and of the fragmented society in which we live.

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As for the fragmentation *within ourselves*, we all have experienced this. Our desires, our thoughts, our intentions: so often these things seem to contradict one another. Saint Paul describes an example of this when he confesses that the good he wants to do, he does not do; but the evil which he does *not* want to do, that is what he does!⁵ In another place he tells of a “thorn” in his flesh from which he prays to be relieved, but which the Lord says will remain in order to help his humility.⁶ Another time, Paul expresses the tension he feels between wanting to go home to be with God, and wanting to remain on earth to continue serving God’s people.⁷

The heart, says Pope Francis, is the place where all of the apparently fragmented parts of our selves can come together. As he says in his encyclical: “The heart is also capable of unifying and harmonizing our personal history, which may seem hopelessly fragmented, yet is the place where everything can make sense.”⁸

At this Mass, and at the beginning of this Forty Hours devotion, we are in the perfect place to experience this truth. If we take time to enter our own hearts, where God is waiting to meet us, and if we listen to His “still, small voice”⁹, we come to realize that the “fragments” within us do not have to pull us apart. Rather, they can be put together as part of a single story whose Author is God. And so, the apparent “contradictions” that we carry within us come to exist in a kind of harmony.

In this way we discover how our heart can “unite the fragments” *inside of us*.

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³ Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos* on the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ, 24 October 2024, 17-23.

⁴ Cf. *Dilexit Nos*, 29; *Gaudium et Spes*, 14.

⁵ Cf. *Romans* 7:19.

⁶ Cf. *2 Corinthians* 12:7-9.

⁷ Cf. *Philippians* 1:22-24.

⁸ *Dilexit Nos*, 19.

⁹ *1 Kings* 19:12.

When this happens, it is easier to take the next step: working to unite the fragments *outside ourselves*. In other words, in the human community of which we are members. An approach to community which begins with a “hardened heart” is something which is so much on display in our national politics. This approach claims that, in order for a society to thrive, the ideas of one group must dominate the ideas of the other. By this logic, only *my* idea counts. If your experiences, thoughts, and objectives challenge my own, then they must be defeated.

But shutting out others because they are inconvenient to our ideals is destructive to the human community. It is not the way of Christ. As the Holy Father says in his encyclical, the human heart is meant to be a “guest house”.¹⁰ If we have open and trusting hearts, then we are able to “welcome” the experience, thoughts, and desires of others, even if there is discomfort. We can “make room” for others. We can allow diversity to exist—even for conflicts to exist—but for human community to remain real and fruitful. We can promote the wellbeing of each other, even if we differ.

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For this to happen, what is necessary—and what is available to us tonight—is an encounter with the Heart of Christ through the Eucharist. He is present to us as our crucified and risen Savior. The victory of Easter, which we celebrate in the Eucharist, was a victory for all humanity. There are no “winners” and “losers” in God’s plan for his children. He is a Father who deeply loves all of us, and who always looks upon us as brothers and sisters of each other. Jesus would suffer a thousand deaths before ever pitting one of us against another.

Today, if we listen, we can hear the voice of the Lord, who chooses to walk with *all* of humanity, and who invites us to join him on that walk, excluding no one. May we not harden our hearts to this call. Instead, may this Eucharist renew our hearts, making them places where what is fragmented becomes united in love.

¹⁰ *Dilexit Nos*, 17.