

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
MEMORIAL OF SAINT BONIFACE, JUNE 5, 2019
OPENING MASS FOR THE WORLD CONGRESS OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION
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Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to the United States, I want to express the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of the Holy Father and to convey Pope Francis' gratitude for your efforts directed toward advancing the Gospel through Catholic education, opening new horizons, especially for our young people, to a better future and world. I wish to thank Philippe Richard, Secretary General of the International Office of Catholic Education, as well as Father Joseph McShane of Fordham University and Father Joseph O'Keefe for their kind invitation to join you as we open this World Congress for Catholic Education with the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy.

As educators, we constantly ask our students questions, and we hope that they will learn the right answers to our questions. Amid the many challenges of our day – increasing secularism, relativism, individualism, an obsession with technology, and extreme poverty and marginalization, to name a few – as *Catholic educators* we want to lead our students to discover that Christ is the answer.

Christ is the answer, but sometimes the task of educators is also to help students to think critically so that they ask the right questions. 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. Ministers of the Gospel and Catholic educators, by their witness and by their efforts of accompanying students, assist 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, a gaze that communicates to the person that they are valued and an awareness that each person must follow a path just as we had to. It was this loving gaze that Christ cast upon the two pillars of the Church: Peter and Paul.

Simon was a fisherman. As a fisherman's son, he probably only imagined himself being a fisherman. His brother Andrew pointed out Jesus to him, and his life changed. Until that time, searching the depths of his being, Simon could only think of himself as a fisherman. Only after his encounter with Jesus was Simon changed into Peter the Rock. Jesus was a masterful educator. He saw his disciples' potential. He knew their strengths and weaknesses but believed in them. He engaged them with parables. Sometimes he was direct. Other times he had to correct them, sometimes harshly, as when he told Peter, "Get behind me, Satan." Mostly, Jesus educated His students by loving them, setting an example for them as when he washed their feet, and finally by forgiving them, allowing them to be transformed by His Merciful Love. Only in this way could Simon be transformed into Peter, the Rock.

Saul was a scholar of the Law. He probably only ever imagined himself being a strict interpreter and preacher of the Law. Then, he encountered Jesus and heard His voice, and his life was changed. He was transformed from a scholar of the law into a fisherman – or, should I say, a fisher of men? After knowing Jesus and His Spirit, Paul gave his whole being to his mission – to draw all nations into the net of God’s love.

In Paul’s Farewell Discourse to the presbyters of Ephesus, he exhorts them to keep watch over each other and the whole flock. Paul no longer lives for himself, but for others. His concern is for the mission that has been entrusted to him; for the Gospel; for the fledgling churches. Paul is not concerned about himself or personal reward. He is interested really in just one thing- drawing more people into the net of God’s love. He was concerned for his own – the Jews – and for the Gentiles. He wanted the Gospel to be heard by those at the peripheries and those at the center. He was entirely committed to his mission, willingly suffering stoning, scourging, shipwreck, and imprisonment to educate His flock in the love of Jesus Christ.

Paul was transformed, beginning with his encounter with Christ on the Road to Damascus, into one who ministers to others. In today’s First Reading, he reminds the presbyters that they are to unite the flock, to help the weak, and to be generous. *It is better to give than to receive*. He is not speaking of money but of a generosity of spirit. It is Christ who lives in Paul. It is He who gave His very life for his flock. Paul wants to make this generous love more widely known. He invites us to reflect on the question as educators: What is my real mission?

Paul knew his mission would not be easy; the Spirit would lead him to places of imprisonment and suffering. The presbyters wept, embracing Paul, for he told them that they will not see his face again. The Scriptures do not say that Paul wept. Paul presses on with the mission, leaving behind his beloved children. He gets on his ship; he must catch more fish. From Miletus, he goes forward to his fate first in Jerusalem and then in Rome. In the end, Paul through his labors and hardships witnesses to the fact that *it is better to give than to receive*.

How willing are we to give? To accompany young people, giving of our time and energy? These days many young people are critical and ask existential questions and questions 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. We must be like Jesus in today’s Gospel - praying for them, consecrating them in the Truth. Encountering the One who is the Truth that sets us free, 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 also have an expectation of us: 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 too must entrust ourselves to the Lord, asking Him to consecrate us in the truth.

As leaders and educators, 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. God chooses people for a mission: to attract others to Him by their witness. God has chosen you to be part of the mission to educate others to a fraternal humanism and to build a civilization of love. This process demands time, effort and patience, but the investment is worth it. Yes, *it is better to give than to receive*.