

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FRANCISCAN SISTERS OF CHARITY
HOLY FAMILY CONVENT, MANITOWOC, WISCONSIN
JULY 5, 2019

My Dear Friends in Christ,

I am very pleased to be with you at this celebration to give thanks to God for the many blessings have come to the Church and the world through the prayers and ministry of the Franciscan Sisters of Charity. I thank Bishop Ricken for his hospitality and for his presence among us and am grateful to Sister Natalie Binversie, your Community Director, for her invitation to be with you. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to this country, I want to express Pope Francis' spiritual closeness and heartfelt congratulations on this momentous occasion in the life of your community and to assure you of his prayers.

One theme for this liturgy is "Remembering." Certainly, at a Sesquicentennial Celebration such as this, we can remember the great figures who helped found this Congregation – women like Teresa Gramlich, who would become Sister Maria Gabriela, the first elected Superior of the fledgling order, as well as the other brave women who were committed to the education of young people. Other events, like the arrival of 27 Poor School Sisters of Saint Francis who arrived from Germany after fleeing religious persecution. Some memories recall tragedies; for example, the fire in 1881 that destroyed the Motherhouse.

From the ashes, God brought unity to the young Franciscan community. Somehow, His Providential hand was at work. The Franciscan Sisters, as you know, continued to flourish and grow, staffing parish schools, founding the Holy Family Institute, and taking care of the sick, engaging in hospital and healthcare ministry, spreading quickly throughout the country, as far west as Yuma, Arizona, caring for Native Americans, and even staffing a school in Honolulu, Hawaii. Throughout these one hundred fifty years, the Sisters have preserved their charism, shaping and forming hearts and affirming the dignity of each person, from the child beginning to read to an elderly person nearing the end of the journey in this life. We give thanks to God as we "remember" how His grace has been at work in and through the sisters who responded generously to His call.

Unfortunately, we live in a day and age in which "remembering" is not always valued. Modern people tend to live in the present moment, forgetting the connection with the past and the collective wisdom of our ancestors. One result of the Enlightenment and modern philosophy is that people have a genuine distrust in speaking about the future and a distrust of the past, that is, of the Tradition. Living in the present moment, we move from one thing to another, sometimes presuming that what is most recent is best and that the lessons of the past were for primitive people. Everything becomes disposable, and we risk losing the sense of being part of a living Tradition. It is as if we are trying to blot out the past.

For Judaism and Christianity, the past is decisive. God has acted in history. Salvation began in historical events. Our eschatological future lies in remembering what God has done and in awaiting the future that will come. St. Thomas Aquinas captured it well in his *O Sacrum Convivium*: "O sacred banquet, in which Christ becomes our food, the memory of his passion is recalled; the soul is filled with grace; and, the pledge of future glory is given to us."

The Eucharist, which we are celebrating, is the sacrament of memory. It is a memorial that recalls the history of grace – what God has done – in Christ. It preserves the charity of God and the love that He has for each of us. It is a memorial (*anamnesis*). Jesus commands: *Do this in memory of me*. Yet, it is not a simple remembrance or repetition but the celebration and remembrance of a mystery that makes present the saving sacrifice of Calvary in an unbloody manner.

Do this in memory of me. The command of our Lord at the Last Supper can be connected with the words we heard from Saint Paul in the letter to the Colossians. *Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him*. The word *eucharist* means thanksgiving. In addition to offering sacrifice, we give thanks to God for His blessings and guidance, as we intercede for the living and the dead.

Moreover, the Holy Eucharist is not merely something to be received. In receiving Him, we can be transformed to live in a manner consistent with the Mystery received. The Eucharist helps us to remember the commandment to love: *This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*. The Lord Jesus can heal us, enlivening our faith, so we practice more fervently those virtues outlined by Saint Paul: *heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience*.

“Remembering” what God has done for us can fill our hearts with gratitude and spur us on to continue to minister with zeal. However, sometimes (and this is true in community life) we remember hurts and disappointments. We hold grudges and carry grievances, which gradually grow heavier with time. It is then that we must also remember how the Lord has forgiven us. Saint Paul reminds us that we need to bear with one another, forgiving one another, adding *as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do*. We must remember the Lord's mercy toward us and having received mercy, share it with others – including our students, our patients, and our sisters in community. Yes, remembering the “mercies” of the Lord is essential if we are to build a culture of mercy, as the Holy Father desires.

The model of discipleship is the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary is the woman of the memory. In her were joined the graces and hopes of the people of Israel. Through her Son, all that was prophesied was fulfilled. Rooted in the history and faith of her people, she does not believe only because God has a unique, personal relationship with her; rather, she believes as one who belongs to a people whom God has chosen as his own. Her *Magnificat* captures the fact that her faith is directed toward the God of her fathers. There Mary preserves the memory of the great works of God in the past and foresees the future works of Divine Mercy and blessing for future generations.

Mary is the living memory of the Church. She teaches the Church about the need and duty to tell others about the love God has for them. The Church has a role in communicating the story of salvation history, while giving prophetic witness, thanksgiving and praise to God. Her (and your) response will motivate others to also give witness and to encourage trust and hope in God. We learn from Mary how to cultivate the memory of the things of God, recalling His covenants, especially the New Covenant, sealed in the Blood of Jesus. By telling the story of salvation history, the Church can provide society and culture with a way of recovering its lost unity.

My Sisters, you also need to tell your story: the story of how God called you to belong to Him and to belong to *this* community, which for the last one hundred and fifty years has given faithful witness to God, who is to be loved above all else. While remembering the past, your life of the evangelical counsels

also directs the gaze of the men and women of our day to the future – to our destiny – to our union with God in Heaven.

Giving thanks to God for all He has done and remembering His commandment to love one another, I exhort you, my sisters, to keep walking together in hope wherever God leads, remembering also that He is a faithful God. He is a God who remembers His promises, and He has promised you life in abundance in His Kingdom.