

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
 APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
 ON THE OCCASION THE 14TH ANNIVERSARY OF MONSIGNOR LUIGI GIUSSANI
 FEAST OF THE CHAIR OF SAINT PETER
 CATHEDRAL OF SAINT MATTHEW, WASHINGTON, D.C.
 FEBRUARY 22, 2019**

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to this country, I greet you on the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter. I express His Holiness' paternal affection for you and assure you of Pope Francis' spiritual closeness, as this evening we commemorate the fourteenth anniversary of the passing of the Servant of God Luigi Giussani, for whom we give thanks to God.

Bishop Massimo Camisasca has written:

"God gives every man only one vocation, and every man is called to discover the one purpose and direction of his life. Vocations are not added, one on top of another: in the course of this life, a person does not get called to this, now to that: there is only one vocation for each person. ... When God conceives of our face, he conceives of it in its complete form, even though each of us has to achieve it in time as a progressive discovery. And each one of us experiences his own freedom as the possibility of corresponding to the Father's will, to God's will."

The Call of Father Luigi Giussani

Tonight, I wish to place in front of you the idea of a vocation as a call and gift of God. As we remember don Giussani, we consider his life and death a gift to the Church. God called him to be a priest who founded a movement which led others to encounter the Mystery of Christ, which in turn opened new horizons, a new way of living, for so many others.

His sister Livia described him as a child as being unable to stand still. He spent his life in the service of the Gospel. With Saint Ambrose, he could rightly say, "In the simplicity of my heart joyfully I have given You everything." Upon learning of his death, Saint John Paul II wrote:

"His entire apostolic action could be summed up by the frank and decisive invitation to a personal encounter with Christ, which he knew how to present to those who approached him as a full and definitive response to the deepest expectations of the human heart."

Even in the darkness of 1968, when nearly everyone abandoned the movement, he understood that the only way forward was in Christ. He proposed the centrality of Christ. This was his call as a priest – to help others encounter Christ, especially to the young, and in doing so to draw men and women, from every walk of life and every continent, into the redeeming love of Christ. At his funeral, Cardinal Ratzinger said:

"Seeing Christ, Giussani truly knew that to encounter Christ means to follow Him. This encounter is a road, a journey, a journey that also passes through the 'valley of darkness.'"

Ratzinger continued that this road is the Way of the Cross. The Cross itself is a mystery of love. Christ called don Giussani to be a priest and to imitate this way of love by spending himself in service – by giving his life for others. Thus, Ratzinger continued, "He has truly become the

father of many and by guiding people not to himself but to Christ, he has truly conquered hearts. He has helped to make the world better. He has helped open up the doors of the world to heaven.”

The Call of Peter

Grateful for the life of don Giussani, we can appreciate the decisiveness of the generous and free response of even one man to the call of Christ. What a difference it makes in our world! Let us then consider the person of Simon Peter and the call of the Holy Father.

Simon was a fisherman, along with his brother Andrew. Simon probably only conceived of himself as a fisherman, but God had conceived of him as a “fisher of men”, as the “Rock” on whom His Church would be built. It would take Simon time to discover his call and to live it more perfectly. Yet, Jesus, casting His first gaze upon Him, saw his potential. He had not called him to mediocrity but to greatness.

When Andrew said to His brother, in St. John's Gospel, “*We have found the Messiah,*” Peter followed. In Saint Luke's account of the call of the fisherman, Peter was astounded at the miraculous catch of fish, and he said, “*Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man.*” But this was the one thing the Lord would not do. He called him to follow Him. The encounter with Christ changed Simon's life. Of course, Simon would have many difficulties in accepting the call. He did not want to accept the suffering and ignominy of the cross. In a time of trial, he denied the Lord three times, but the Lord's gaze never left him. When Jesus looked on him, His eyes of mercy pierced the heart of Simon Peter, and Peter wept.

After the Resurrection, Jesus saw Simon and asked him three times, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” The merciful gaze of Jesus provoked from Simon a response of love. Jesus told him, “*When you were young, you used to about where you wanted, but when you are old, another will bind you and lead you where you do not wish to go.*” This was to signify the death by which he would glorify God.

Here we come to another dimension of vocation – being bound and led. If Peter examined his life, or, if we examine our lives, we can see in the steps we have taken, in the events, circumstances, and conditions we have experienced, a decisive direction. We think that we are choosing our own path, but in reality, we are being led. We cannot and do not live our vocations on our own terms. In recognizing we are being led by the Lord, we are not being deprived of our freedom, but are freely surrendering it to him, thereby experiencing the great peace He offers.

The steps of Peter's vocation included this evening's Gospel: his confession of faith! Boldly Simon proclaims, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*” Jesus responds, “*Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter and on this Rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.*”

Jesus gave him the keys of the Kingdom, for the binding and loosing of sins. He gave him an authority to offer forgiveness. He entrusted him with authority to teach and shepherd the flock. Elsewhere, he asked him to strengthen the brethren in unity. The successors of Saint Peter continue this ministry of strengthening the brethren and building up the Church in unity. It is no easy task. The culture, within and outside of the Church, has made the task more challenging for Pope Francis. Msgr. Ronald Knox is reported to have said, “Perhaps it would be a good thing if

every Christian, certainly if every priest, could dream once in his life that he were pope, and wake from that nightmare in a sweat of agony.”

The responsibilities of the vocation of the Successor of Saint Peter are enormous. I ask each of you to pray for Pope Francis and to renew your commitment to communion with the See of Peter. Father Giussani could not have conceived of Christ without the Church or the Church without a Pope. God has called Pope Francis to this special vocation – to be an instrument of unity and fraternity in shepherding the People of God; to offer them a credible and authoritative witness to God’s love and mercy; and, to feed the sheep.

On this feast of the Chair of St. Peter, we can also ask: What does it mean that God called a Pope from Latin America to shepherd the universal Church at this moment in history? What is the Spirit saying to us about the mission of the Church and the need to engage the world with the joy of the Gospel?

Like don Giussani, the Holy Father gives priority to the encounter with Christ. It is there that the whole missionary endeavor begins. The exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* begins with these words:

“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is born anew.”

The Call of the Christian

God gives every man and woman a vocation. He has not called you merely individuals but as a Body, the Church. He calls you to use your freedom to discover both your dignity and your mission. Mission is the expansion of the communion that we live together; it implies expanding our fraternal friendships to those whom we meet, in an awareness that communion with and in Christ is given to us forever. He has called you to communion.

Before being sent on mission, we are called together to be with Him – to encounter Him anew. Remaining in Him and in friendship with Him is the key to the fruitfulness of our mission. Each day, in prayer and at work, we try to educate the heart and mind to abiding in this communion. Communion becomes the form of life, a way of living that becomes impossible to live without sacrifice, without conversion, without being impacted by the encounter with an Original Presence.

Christ has called us to be together. At the Last Supper, He prayed: “*That all may be one Father, as you and I are One, so that the world may believe.*” Christ has called us to witness to the communion of love that is the Blessed Trinity. Father Giussani always encouraged us to retain a sense of wonder and awe. Look around; see how many different people, from all walks of life, from all over the world are gathered in this cathedral tonight. It is a miracle that Christ has willed us to be together. Christ has placed us together, not only because it is meaningful for us, but because it is meaningful for everyone – for our whole world.

Luigi Giussani died fourteen years ago, but in Christ, he lives. As I said at Rimini last summer, “Meeting Christ and being changed by Him – the revolution of the heart – this is what turns the wheel of history! This is the true revolution! This is Giussani’s legacy, his gift to the Church, which lives on in you.” It lives on in us – together on the road – as we respond to the call of Christ: “*Follow Me.*”