

**HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO  
THIRD SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, JANUARY 22, 2017  
SAINT JOHN PAUL II SEMINARY, WASHINGTON, DC**

My dear friends in Christ, as the Apostolic Nuncio, the Pope's personal representative in this country, I am delighted to be with you on this Sunday and assure you of the Holy Father's spiritual closeness and prayers for you as you discern the call to priestly life. I wish to thank Msgr. Panke, Father Griffin, Father Ivany and your seminary formators, not only for their gracious invitation, but also for their important work in forming the next generation of priests who will be called to bring the joy of the Gospel – *abundant joy and great rejoicing* – to those who dwell in darkness. I want to thank you for responding to the Lord's call to be "fishers of men."

**The Priest is One Who Goes Forth**

In today's Gospel, we heard of the beginnings of Christ's public mission, which included preaching repentance and the Kingdom of God and healing the sick. The Christmas Season helped us to appreciate the closeness of God to humanity. Now the presence of Christ and His preaching reminds us that the Kingdom of God is at hand – in our midst.

But where does Jesus begin his public ministry? He begins at the peripheries – at the outskirts, not in the comforts of Jerusalem, but in the *Galilee of the nations*. Isaiah foretold that the people of Zebulun and Naphtali, who sat in darkness, would see a great light (Is 8:23-9:2). At the margins, Jesus chooses to make the Good News known that the Kingdom of God is at hand! It is here that the Gospel is opened to the nations – not just to those who are religious, prosperous or at the center – but to all! It is a proclamation of joy: *To those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death, light has arisen.*

Following His example, we too, as seminarians and priests, must go out to the peripheries – material and spiritual – to proclaim the Good News! Pope Francis writes in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

"Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel." (EG, 20)

**The Priesthood is a Call and a Gift**

Jesus not only preaches at the peripheries, He also calls to Himself those who are not the elite, not the scholars of the law and scribes, but the simple fisherman, to be his first disciples and Apostles. He goes to them and calls them – to follow Him. They leave everything to follow – to follow on what will be an incredible adventure! The Lord still calls today. He calls by name.

He calls men to be his disciples and to be his priests – even in weakness. For He can do great things in spite of our weakness. This is what the Holy Father calls a "*healthy tension between a dignified shame and a shamed dignity*." It is the attitude of one who seeks a humble and lowly place, but who can also allow the Lord to raise him up for the good of the mission, without complacency." (HOMILY, HOLY THURSDAY, 24 MARCH 2016).

This call to be a disciple and this raising up to be a priest is a gift. As the Holy Father told seminarians in Ecuador:

“It is all gratuitousness. And the entire life of a religious brother and sister, priest and seminarian must walk that path... ‘Lord, today I did this, I did this thing well, I had this difficulty, all this but ... all is from you, all is free gift.’ That is gratuitousness. We are those who receive God’s gratuitousness.” (MEETING WITH PRIESTS, RELIGIOUS, AND SEMINARIANS, NATIONAL MARIAN SHRINE OF EL QUINCHE, QUITO, 8 JULY 2015).

### **The Priest is a Man of Prayer and Communion**

Those whom He calls, He invites to share in his life and His mission. This mission of announcing the Kingdom is bound up with His person. To convey the light of the Gospel is to convey the closeness of God Himself. The Kingdom is close in *Him*, as his miracles, healings, and teachings make known. As Jesus goes about Galilee, He brings life, healing, and mercy. He is the model for the priest and seminarian in formation. If we are to share in his mission, then we must first come to know him in prayer, as the Holy Father says:

“A Bishop who does not pray, a priest who does not pray has closed the door, has closed the path of creativity. It is precisely in prayer, when the Spirit makes you feel something, the devil comes and makes you feel another, but prayer is the condition for moving forward. ...Prayer is so important... Prayer is the first step, because one must open oneself to the Lord to be able to open to others.” (MEETING WITH THE PRIESTS OF THE DIOCESE OF CASERTA, JULY 26, 2014)

In knowing the love that God has for us in prayer and in listening to his voice, then we begin to go beyond ourselves to others to draw others into the Light of the Lord. The priest is to be a man of communion, first and foremost with Him. To be a man of communion, one must also take the time now in seminary to cultivate a sense of fraternity. When we are not rooted in Jesus, division quickly enters the community. Saint Paul saw that discord and factions developed within the Corinthian community and asked: *Is Christ divided?* Disunity, often resulting from gossip and ambition, in the Church is an offense against Christ. The priest is called to build community and it is through Jesus, the Head of the Church, that true communion is found. It is also through a commitment to receiving his Word that the path of unity is found: *Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand!* The commitment to conversion in Christ is the way that leads to unity.

This commitment is what the Holy Father sees as a decisive choice:

“This is why we have to react by choosing fraternity. I am intentionally speaking about ‘choice.’ ... It’s a choice which corresponds to the gift that we have received but that must always be heard and cultivated: communion in Christ in the presbytery, around the Bishop. This communion demands to be lived ... but always in an apostolic perspective, with a missionary lifestyle, with fraternity and simplicity of life.” (MESSAGE TO THE PRIESTS OF THE CATHEDRAL (CASSANO ALL’JONIO), 21 JUNE 2014)

This choice for conversion and communion is not only intended for priests but for the entire flock. Having listened to God’s Word, with a missionary heart and lifestyle, simple and humble, one can go forth to accompany the flock – to be with them and walk with them. In the words of the Holy Father:

“I repeat it often: walking with our people, sometimes in front, sometimes in the middle, and sometimes behind: in front in order to guide the community, in the middle in order to encourage and support; and at the back in order to keep it united and so that no one lags too far behind, to keep them united.” (MEETING WITH CLERGY, CONSECRATED PEOPLE, AND MEMBERS OF DIOCESAN PASTORAL COUNCILS, CATHEDRAL OF SAN RUFFINO, ASSISI, 4 OCTOBER 2013)

My friends, you, like the Apostles who left their father and their boats and nets, are beginning a great adventure and journey. Know that the One who called you walks with you. Listen to His voice in prayer and remember the freshness and power of that first encounter with Him, which drew you beyond yourself – to go outside of yourself. Give thanks to God for the gratuitous gift which he has given you to be a disciple and, God-willing, a man of communion. The Church today needs priests who are close to their people, so that the people may know that God is close to them. There are some at the peripheries who trapped in darkness believe that they can never be forgiven or believe they are unworthy of God’s love. You must be generous, tireless in your response to the call, sharing with others the joyful message: *The Kingdom of God is at hand!*