

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
THURSDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT
OPENING MASS OF “24 HOURS FOR THE LORD”
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, DC, MARCH 11, 2021

We gather to worship and adore our Eucharistic Lord at this opening of the 40 Hours Devotion at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. In his message for Lent, Pope Francis wrote, “Love is a gift that gives meaning to our lives. ... A small amount ... never ends, but becomes a source of life and happiness.” (cf. Pope Francis, *Message for Lent 2021*, 11 November 2020)

The Eucharist, is the Sacrament of God’s Love, which becomes a source of life and happiness for us all. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father’s representative to the United States, I express His Holiness’ spiritual closeness and paternal affection to all gathered here and to those listening on television, radio, and through live-streaming, courtesy of the Eternal Word Television Network.

Unlike those who have opened their eyes and ears to join the sacred liturgy, in the scriptures today, we hear of those who close their ears and hearts to the Lord. In the First Reading, God sends Jeremiah to the people, but his prophetic voice is rejected, and God, through him, laments that “*they walked in the hardness of their evil hearts... that they have turned their backs, not their faces, to me ... that they have not obeyed or paid heed; that they have stiffened their necks.*”

The Psalmist too recalls the testing of God, when the people provoked Him in the wilderness at Meribah and Massah by the hardening of their hearts. We sang, “*If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts.*” Unfortunately, we are sometimes like children who do not pay attention and, therefore, do not hear His voice. At other times, we are stubborn like teenagers; we hear His voice, but we harden our hearts against the Father, choosing to go our own way, presuming that our way is the right way. Consequently, we wander aimlessly in the desert.

Still other times, we think of ourselves as “mature” adults, experts like the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day, who increase their resistance to Jesus. In the Gospel, Jesus expels a demon, healing a mute person. *Kophos*, in Greek, can refer to someone who does not speak but also to someone who is deaf, who has closed his ears. Jesus helps open the person’s ears and mouth. The crowds initially are amazed, caught up in wonder at the Mercy of God. They are not unlike the Hebrews, who at the time of the Exodus, saw the wonders of God but later hardened their hearts against Him.

After an initial reaction of awe, the people question Jesus. Some say He drives out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. Others, to test Him, ask for a sign. In accusing Jesus of casting out demons by Satan’s power, they demonstrate their resistance to Him. Jesus responds by pointing out that if a kingdom is divided against itself, it cannot stand.

Aware that there were exorcists among the Jews, Jesus asks, “*By whom do your own people drive them out?*” While exorcists and magicians existed in ancient times, and we could think of Pharaoh’s magicians, who, up to a point, could imitate the deeds of Moses and Aaron, their powers were surpassed

by God's power. It is by the finger of God that Jesus casts out demons, meaning that the Kingdom of God is upon those present.

Despite the promises of the Kingdom – justice, peace, mercy, and truth – some still chose to reject the Kingdom and to choose the kingdom of the Evil One. Luke makes use of a short parable about a strong man being overcome by a stronger man. The devil is a strong man, but Jesus is stronger.

Prior to the Incarnation and the in-breaking of the Kingdom into history, humanity had been powerless to defeat the strong man; however, Jesus is one who is mightier than “the strong man” and binds him, setting free the men and women held captive, just as He freed the mute man from his affliction. Through the Beloved Son of God and by the finger of God, the strong man is overcome. We are no longer bound. We are free – able to live in the freedom of the sons and daughters of God, but only if we choose to embrace Him, if we open our hearts to Him, if we convert.

We cannot remain neutral. Our conversion must be complete. We must choose. Although we did not hear it today, Luke continues to speak about the demon being cast out but returning with seven other spirits, but they can only return if we allow them. By making a decisive choice for Jesus – by allowing our conversion to be total – we can resist their attacks.

If we want to put up resistance to the attacks of the evil one, then we need to listen to the voice of the Lord, especially in prayer. *If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts.* Rather than hardening our hearts, we need to soften them, by responding to His merciful help to love more and more all that He teaches us, listening to His words as words to be done, becoming not merely hearers of the Word but doers of the Word.

Lent is a time not only for prayer, but for almsgiving, which really means more than giving to the poor. Properly-speaking, it means being “mercy-minded.” This is what Pope Francis wants for the whole Church – for us to be a Church of Mercy, noting that the Jubilee Year of Mercy, held five years ago, was not to be a mere parenthesis in the life of the Church. Rather than stiffening our necks, Christ desires that we turn with Him when He turns to the Father, when He turns to the poor that He wants us to help. We must be doers of the Word.

Nevertheless, we cannot neglect our spiritual life for a type of social activism. During this season of prayer and conversion, rather than turning our backs on the Lord, we need to turn our faces and hearts in prayer and in Adoration toward Him. The word “convert” comes from the Latin *con-vertere*, which means to turn with the Lord. Like the Greek word *metanoia*, it demands turning away from going our own way, turning around, and walking along the way that leads to the Father.

Jesus' opponents in the Gospel ask for a sign from heaven. In the hardness of their hearts, they fail to recognize that He is the sign. Saint Alphonsus Liguori, in his *On the Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*, writes:

“Saint Bernadine of Siena says that people remember more vividly and hold more dear the signs of love shown them in death. So when they come to die, friends are accustomed to leave to the persons they have loved in this life some gift, a garment or ring, in memory of their affection. But, you my Jesus, in leaving this world, what have you left us in memory of your love? Not a garment or ring, of course, but your Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, your whole Self, keeping nothing for yourself. ‘He gave you all,’ says Saint John

Chrysostom: 'He left nothing for Himself.' (Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, *On the Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*, II.1)

As we begin this Forty Hours Devotion, let us turn our hearts toward the Lord and allow the warmth of His Eucharistic Heart, the ultimate sign from heaven of God's love for us, to soften our hearts that we might show love to those around us. "Love is a gift that gives meaning to our lives. ... A small amount ... never ends, but becomes a source of life and happiness."