

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
WEDNESDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF EASTER
WASHINGTON, D.C. CHAPTER OF LEGATUS
APRIL 18, 2018

I want to welcome all of you to the Apostolic Nunciature, the house of the Pope, here in Washington. As the Apostolic Nuncio, I want to express the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of the Holy Father, and I want to encourage you in your vocations to be authentic missionary disciples who bring the joy of the Gospel to your homes and workplaces.

In our first reading, we heard how, immediately following the martyrdom of Stephen, a great persecution broke out, scattering the people. The stoning of Stephen was a critical moment for the early Christian community. Jesus had said, “*Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.*” (John 12:25). Stephen’s death would bear much fruit through the other disciples in the face of persecution.

The stoning of Stephen unleashed a fierce persecution of the first followers of Jesus. While the Apostles remained in Jerusalem, the others were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Some would head toward Antioch, where the disciples would be called Christians for the first time. Others, like Philip, would go to Samaria, but Saint Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that “*those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.*” This is the point: nothing could stop the first Christians from preaching, not even persecution. The word would go forth!

Today, the Holy Father never ceases to call us to be a Church that goes forth out of our comfort zones and to be in a permanent state of mission. He invites us to consider our own personal mission and vocation, given as a gift by the Lord, and to respond generously to the call to be disciples and missionaries – missionary disciples. The Church is, by its very nature, missionary, and each of us, in our own way, is called to share the gift of faith with others – even in the face of opposition and persecution.

Philip did not just go to Samaria and keep his faith hidden; rather, he “*proclaimed the Christ to them.*” He did not preach himself, nor did he offer a complicated philosophical system. He preached Christ to them, and *the crowds paid attention to what was said.* The attentiveness of the crowds reminds us of the longing of the people to hear the life-changing Word of God. Their attention speaks to the attractiveness of the message – the attractiveness of Christ Himself! This is a reminder to us about how we ought to share the faith – by showing forth the beauty of Christ.

It was not only the words Philip preached that drew them, it was also the signs that accompanied him: *unclean spirits, crying out in a loud voice, came out of the possessed, and the paralyzed and crippled people were cured.* People came to faith because of the power of God at work in him. His works were, in fact, acts of mercy toward the suffering and a proclamation of the kingdom. What sort of signs accompany the Church today? What signs of the Lord are at work in my life? How do I show forth the Merciful Face of God?

Finally, the reading concludes with this line: *There was great joy in that city.* Pope Francis’ first exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* begins:

The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.

With Christ, joy is constantly born anew. (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 1)

Indeed, what joy there is in hearing the words of the Gospel today: “*Everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him on the last day!*” (John 6:40) Is not true joy to be found in the Holy Eucharist which we celebrate and receive? Jesus said in this Gospel: “*I am the Bread of Life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst!*” (John 6:35) This is what Christ offers: new life, eternal life, life without hungering and thirsting! He is the source of our joy.

The Eucharist is the sacrament which nourishes Christian joy. It is the strongest sacramental sign of the Paschal Lordship of Christ, recalling his Paschal Victory over sin and death. The joy that He has won is preserved and shared. It is an abiding joy in the Church. Even in times of persecution, the Church celebrates the Eucharist with a spousal joy, the joy of one promised to Christ. The Eucharist is a foretaste of the eschatological banquet in which those invited will share in the heavenly banquet of the kingdom in its fullness.

In the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the Eucharist, the missionary Church brings joy to the world. Nourished by the Eucharist, may we go forth in a true spirit of joy as missionary disciples!