

ADVENT II A

University Mass in Honour of Mary

Holy Rosary Cathedral

7 December 2013

Dear brother priests, and dear University and College students, and friends in Christ:

Introduction

Tonight we have come together in our Cathedral as those who are involved in the Church's mission of evangelization in the vitally important world of higher education: chaplains, students, faculty and friends. We are celebrating this Mass in honour of Mary, whom the liturgical season of Advent, more than any other season, places before us.

This coming week we shall celebrate two of her great feasts: that of her Immaculate Conception, her freedom from sin from the first moment of her conception, and of her appearance as the indigenous Virgin, Our Lady of Guadalupe, on the hill of Tepeyac. where she assured us of her tender protection and guidance as our Mother.

Moreover, the closer we come to the celebration of Christmas, the more the Church presents her as the one who "longed for him with love

beyond all telling,"¹ the pregnant young Mother awaiting her Son's Birth. Especially during the closing days of Advent we are on a journey with her to the stable at Bethlehem. In these days, we witness the gradual unfolding of her "yes" to the Lord uttered at the Annunciation. "Yes, let it be done unto me according to your Word; let me not just hear your Word but live it fully in my life" (cf. Lk 1:38).

John the Baptist

In this evening's Gospel, however, Matthew presents us with the second gatekeeper of Advent, another great figure who played a role in preparing for the Lord's encounter with humanity: the rough and tough, wild man in the desert, John the Baptist. He had a severe message of repentance: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (Mt 3:2). And St. Matthew compares him to the one foretold by the Prophet Isaiah who was to announce the arrival of the Messiah with the words: "prepare the way of the Lord" (Mt 3:3).

The preaching of this magnetic and gruff man attracted many followers. He presented himself as the simple Voice to the Word of God,

¹ Roman Missal, Preface II of Advent.

who was Christ. What must be done urgently, he preached, is to convert, to turn our life around. He demanded a change of attitude and a change in behaviour.

For Christians, conversion is not an exterior or partial change but a reorientation of our entire self. It is a real transition from selfishness to love, from an attitude of self-defence, of holding on to oneself, to the giving of oneself to others. It is a change so radical that it is incompatible with old mental, spiritual and social structures in the same way in which new wine cannot be put in old wineskins.

Each of us carries around our own specific baggage: habits of a lifetime, quirks, self-indulgences, fears, resentments – any number of sins which impede our following Christ. Few of us want to review the comfortable-if-imperfect habits of our life. We may be willing to admit, like the next guy, that “I’m not perfect and I’ve got my faults” – but we prefer to leave them vague, so we never have to do anything about them. We resist conversion, we are even afraid to take the first steps in what might well be a long and painful journey.

But such a general sense of sinfulness is not helpful; it induces guilt without providing any remedy for change. What the Baptist confronts us

with is the need to submit ourselves to an honest confrontation – with the specifics that we might try to dodge. To follow Jesus with integrity we must heed his voice which invites us to an ever deeper conversion away from sin to embrace his mercy, especially as it is offered in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

If we are tempted to think that genuine conversion is just too difficult, it's helpful to remind ourselves that conversion really means to return home. It is a recovery of our deepest humanity and the regaining of our profound identity as the Father's daughter or son. As we turn gradually more and more to the Lord, we do not lose anything that is worthwhile, but find life and freedom from what saddens and destroys us from within.

Mary as Our Advent Teacher

Now I would like to depart from today's Scripture to say just a few – or perhaps more than a few – words about Mary as our Advent Teacher: what she can tell university students about their call to life and to holiness.

Be Protagonists of Life as an Adventure with God

First, I see Mary as a woman of great inner strength and courage, someone who was willing to embark on a great life adventure whose consequences she could not foresee with any clarity. She tells us, especially

she tells young people, that they need not be weighed down by the mediocrity, boredom and seeming monotony of everyday life. We cannot deny that “possessions, money and power can give a momentary thrill, the illusion of being happy, but they end up possessing us and making us always want to have more, never satisfied.”² On the other hand, if we reject such illusions and answer “yes” to the Lord, he opens paths that go far beyond the ordinary to the “life in abundance” (Jn 10:10) promised his followers.

“Do not allow yourselves to be robbed of your youthful enthusiasm!” Pope Francis said last Saturday to the university students in Rome. Then he added: “Your will and your capacities, united with the power of the Holy Spirit which lives in each one of you from the day of your Baptism, allows you to be more than mere spectators – to be active agents in contemporary events,” the Pope said. “Please, do not look upon life from the balcony, as an observer! Get involved, where there are challenges, where your help is needed to work for life, development, the fight for the dignity of persons, the struggle against poverty, the battle for values, and the many other battles we

² Francis, Homily at Welcome Ceremony for World Youth Day, Rio de Janeiro (25 July 2013).

encounter every day.”³.

What the Holy Father is saying is that young people, Catholic university students, can't leave it to others, to their peers, to be the protagonists of change. You are the ones who hold the future. Through you the future is brought about and transformed according to the mind of Christ – or according to the values of the world. So, dear friends, be protagonists of the world's transformation. Overcome the paralysis of apathy. Instead, offer a Christian response to the social and political problems which afflict us.

Mary was not an observer of life from the outside. She lived her “yes” at every moment and in every situation, never fearing to immerse herself in the joys and sorrows of this life whose doors open to the very fullness of life in God.⁴

Be Missionary Disciples

A second lesson Mary teaches us in Advent is simply this: “be disciples of my Son and be his missionaries. Be missionary disciples.”

Immediately after the Angel Gabriel proclaimed to her that she would

³ Francis, Homily at Vespers with the University Students of Rome (30 November 2013).

⁴ Cf. Francis, Address at the Vigil, World Youth Day, Rio de Janeiro (27 July 2013).

become the Mother of Jesus, she did not keep that gift her virginal pregnancy to herself. Rather, with a sense of responsibility, Mary set off from her home and went in haste to help her cousin Elizabeth, who was in need of assistance. She carried out an act of love and of practical service. She brought the Gospel, because she brought Jesus who was still in her womb to meet Elizabeth and the unborn John.⁵

In Mary we have our model of a missionary disciple. Today too, the Lord needs you, the young people of the Archdiocese of Vancouver, for his mission. He is calling each of you – and not just some of you, but you, and you, and you – to follow him in his Church as his missionaries.⁶

Jesus did not say: “go, if you would like to, if you have the time,” but rather: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). “Sharing the experience of faith, bearing witness to the faith, proclaiming the Gospel: this is a command that the Lord entrusts to the whole Church, and that includes you”⁷ – right now, as a student; right there, on your campus.

Where is Jesus sending you? His is a frontier without borders. The

⁵ Cf. Francis, Angelus, World Youth Day, Rio de Janeiro (28 July 2013).

⁶ Cf. Francis, Address at the Vigil, World Youth Day, Rio de Janeiro (27 July 2013).

⁷ Francis, Homily, World Youth Day (28 July 2013).

Gospel is for everyone, not just for some. It is not only for those who are closer to us, more receptive, more welcoming – a congenial group of Catholic friends. The saving truth of the Good News is for everyone. Do not be afraid to go and to bring Christ into every area of your student life, even to those who seem the farthest away and the most indifferent. The Lord wants everyone to feel the warmth of his mercy and his love. And you are his instruments.

And, as Blessed John Paul repeated over and over again, a refrain likewise taken up by his successors, “Do not be afraid!” When you go to proclaim Christ, it is he himself who goes before you and guides you. When he sent his disciples on mission, he promised: “I am with you always” (Mt 28:20). And this is also true for you! Jesus never leaves anyone alone! He always walks with you on campus and off, wherever you bring him to others.⁸

Conclusion

Before proceeding with the Eucharist, I would like to offer a simple prayer to Our Lady in whose honour we are celebrating this Mass:

Lord you entrusted your Mother to us on Calvary that she might accompany

⁸ Cf. Francis, Homily, World Youth Day (28 July 2013).

us.

May she take care of us and protect us on our journey.

May she inspire us to be protagonists of your Kingdom.

May she make us disciples like herself, missionaries like herself – your missionary disciples.

May she teach us to step outside ourselves.

May she teach us to go out onto our campuses and onto our streets with your Word.

May she, by her courage, her faith and her active charity, show us the way to serve you now and forever. Amen.⁹

_ J. Michael Miller, CSB
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⁹ Cf. Francis, Address to Young People of Argentina, Rio de Janeiro (25 July 2013).