

Priests and Evangelization

Harrison Hot Springs

16 November 2017

Dear Bishop Joseph, brother priests and brothers in Christ:

Introduction

Our Gospel begins when the disciples of Emmaus, after having recognized the Risen Lord, return to Jerusalem and find the Eleven gathered together. The Risen Christ appears to them, comforts them, overcomes their fear and doubts, and eats with them. Then, to prepare them for their future mission, he opens their hearts to understanding the Scriptures, recalling what had to happen, and revealing what would constitute the nucleus of the Christian proclamation: “Thus it is written, that the Christ is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Lk 24:46-47).

These are the saving events of the kerygma to which the first disciples were to bear witness, as are we, believers in Christ of all times and places. It is important to emphasize that this witness, then as now, is born from an encounter with the Risen Jesus. Our witness is initiated and fed by an ongoing relationship with him. We can be his witnesses only if we have had an experience of knowing, and even feeling, that Jesus is alive and present in our lives.

But this bearing witness is not ultimately our work. Its efficacy does not depend on us, but on God. Jesus promised his disciples, just as

he promises to each of us, powerful assistance from on high, a new presence, that of the Holy Spirit, who emboldens us with courage: “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised” (Lk 24:49). This is the really good news that Jesus is revealing in today’s Gospel.¹

It is this gift of the Holy Spirit which enabled Paul and Barnabas, as we heard in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, to explain to a Jewish audience why their mission was to go beyond the comfort-zone of Judaism, why they were to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world. They cite Jesus’ very own words as the authority behind their mandate: “For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you “bring salvation to the ends of the earth”” (Acts 13:47).

The proclamation of the Gospel “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47) and the saving events to be preached “in his name to all nations” (Lk 24:47) is also today “a primary and unavoidable duty.”² Why? Because it flows from the Lord’s own desire for us as disciples and, *a fortiori*, for us as priests.

Awakened to the Call

Among the great contributions of recent Popes to the life of the

¹ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily at Vespers (25 January 2010).

² Benedict XVI, Message for the 83rd World Mission Sunday 2009, 2.

Church is their emphasis on the vocation of every Christian to be an active proclaimer of Jesus Christ in places and situations which have trivialized, forgotten or have never even been exposed to the Gospel. Long gone are the days when we priests could fulfill the commitment we made at Ordination to “teach what we believe” by preaching to and dealing with the people who come to us or, as is said, by preaching to the choir.

This means that we have to keep reminding ourselves that a parish is not just a family of parishioners, but a territory within which the priest is responsible for all those in his jurisdiction. Every parish in our Dioceses is composed of people who are faithful, people who are on the fringes of the Church’s sacramental life, and many more who do not yet know.

Our task, the Church’s perennial mission, is “to bring Jesus Christ to mankind and to lead mankind to an encounter with Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life.”³ The Church and her ministers exist “in order to evangelize,”⁴ and so it follows that our pastoral efforts today have to be put ever more intentionally, as Pope Francis says, “in a

³ Francis, Address to the College of Cardinals (15 March 2013).

⁴ Blessed Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

missionary key.”⁵

Priests who share in the ministry given to the Apostles by the Lord have likewise been called “to be a light for the Gentiles” (Acts 13:47). As such, they “should have a longing and a passion to illumine all peoples with the light of Christ that shines on the face of the Church, so that all may be gathered into the one human family, under God’s loving fatherhood.”⁶

The Lord has entrusted the Gospel to us for the good of all people. Let’s not forget that in the Archdiocese of Vancouver – and it is probably about the same in the Diocese of Kamloops – more than 50% of baptized Catholics no longer share in the Church’s sacramental life. “Mission territory” for us is no more distant than the neighbourhoods, workplaces, schools, and homes of our parishes.

As priests, we accompany our people, wherever they are on their journey. No one is “hopeless” or undeserving of our concern. In accompanying them, sometimes we must go in front, in order to show them the way. At other times, we must merely be among them, to find out what is happening in their world and why they are wandering off course. And many times we accompany our people from the back, to

⁵ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 33.

⁶ Benedict XVI, Message for the 83rd World Mission Sunday 2009, 1.

help those who are falling behind and also to follow those who know the way better than we do.⁷

How many people, in the peripheries of our parishes are awaiting this Good News which has been entrusted to us? How can they be reached? How can our experience of faith, of the love and mercy of God, and of our encounter with Jesus be shared with them? To find answers to these questions, or at least understand that they *are* questions, is a responsibility of the parish communities under our pastoral care.

I know that all of you are working hard, very hard, and because of this I want to return to what I said at the outset and leave you with a word of encouragement that comes from the Risen Lord himself: “I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city and until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Lk 24:49). We can trust in the Lord who accompanies us and who never abandons us, just as we accompany our people and never abandon them. In the difficulties and disappointments which are present in our pastoral ministry, we need only to remember that the Church’s mission of evangelization is God’s mission, and that he has strengthened us for this work with the gift of his Holy Spirit.

⁷ Cf. Francis, Address to the Rectors and Students of the Pontifical Colleges and Residences in Rome (12 May 2014).

Conclusion

The Eucharist which we are now celebrating inevitably empowers us to evangelize, since our ability to announce the Gospel springs from the Passion and Resurrection of Christ which is made present anew in this Eucharist. Let me conclude by citing Benedict XVI in this regard:

The love that we celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all. What the world needs is God's love; it needs to encounter Christ and to believe in him. The Eucharist is thus the source and summit not only of the Church's life, but also of her mission: "an authentically eucharistic Church is a missionary Church." We too must be able to tell our brothers and sisters with conviction: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us" (1 Jn 1:3).

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