

Advent 2 - Friday

Commissioning Mass for the Simbang Gabi

Holy Rosary Cathedral

14 December 2018

Dear brother priests, deacons, representatives of the various parishes hosting the Simbang Gabi this year, and dear friends in Christ:

Introduction

Once again it is a real pleasure for me to be celebrating with you this evening as the Filipino Catholic community of the Archdiocese of Vancouver gathers to launch in 18 of our parishes the Simbang Gabi novena in preparation for the celebration of the beautiful feast of Christmas: All Saints, Blessed Sacrament, Corpus Christi, Holy Family in Sechelt, Holy Trinity, Immaculate Conception in Delta, Our Lady of Fatima in Coquitlam, Our Lady of Good Counsel, Our Lady of Mercy, Precious Blood, St. Andrew, St. Joseph in Langley, St. Joseph in Mission, St. Joseph in Squamish, St. Mary, St. Matthew, St. Patrick in Vancouver, and St. Peter.

It is a great blessing for our local Church, with its rich cultural and ethnic diversity, to reflect in its members the catholicity of the People of God: that we come together with our different traditions to praise the Lord and give him thanks. We can surely delight in the various ways in which the one Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and lived.

Catholic traditions, such as the Simbang Gabi play an important role for Filipinos who are preparing to celebrate Jesus' birth in

Bethlehem and to honour Mother Mary.

I would like to thank all of you, representatives of so many parishes for coming to this Commissioning ceremony here in our Cathedral. Your presence ensures that the tradition of the Simbang Gabi is a celebration that belongs to the whole Church of Vancouver.

I wish especially to thank Deacon Greg Barcelon, the Coordinator of Filipino Ministry for the Archdiocese for his hard work in fostering that the various Filipino organizations and associations, coordinating their ministries for the benefit of us all.

In our world, which is so filled with divisions and with one group pitted against another, your cooperative spirit bears witness that the Body of Christ is united in bringing the message of Jesus to our world. Our mission of evangelization is more pleasing to the Lord and more effective when we all see ourselves as co-workers in bringing the Good News of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ to our families, friends and co-workers.

Simbang Gabi Novena

Advent, the liturgical season which prepares us for the great Coming in glory of Our Lord at the end of the ages, is also – and most popularly – the time of our preparation for Christmas. These last days before the celebration of the feast – the “novena” of nine final days of preparation – takes us on a journey. We are invited to accompany the

little pilgrimage which took the young, pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, where they had to be registered in the census called for by the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus.

We follow this young couple on their way as they seek different places to stay. Many refused to let them enter their homes or into their hearts. They offered many excuses, just as we do when people make demands on us. They had no room to spare; were too busy to pay the young couple any attention; or they were just plain unwilling to be bothered by any upset in their plans.

We, too, often find it hard to make room for Jesus in our lives, to get closer to him. There are so many things to do, and so many distractions, above all at this time of year. Work demands so much of our time. Perhaps we say to ourselves: “later, later I’ll have the time to pray, to go to Mass, to visit someone in need, to talk to someone who would benefit from attention or a kind word. But not now. Now I just can’t. I have no time, no energy.

Our lives are so full of excuses to delay, to put things off.

But this Novena reminds us not to shut out Jesus when he comes calling. When he comes, when he knocks, we should be prepared to receive him at that very moment. Don’t put it off until a tomorrow, which may never come. Listen to your heart which tells you to act now.

Jesus is knocking at the door of your heart; he is asking for entry, even begging to be let into your life. Welcome him with open arms.

This “letting Jesus into your life” is what makes Christmas a real celebration. If you are not aware that he is accompanying you in your life, then the celebration of his Birth is just decorations, and gifts and too much food.

Gospel

Personally, I find today’s Gospel a little difficult to understand. What is Jesus getting at when he compares “this generation” – could that be us? – to children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another? He cites a proverb that refers to the customs known to people of his day. Among children, the boys were the ones who invited their companions to dance at weddings by playing the flute. For their part, the girls, sang sad songs at funerals to help people mourn. At weddings people were to rejoice, but at funerals they were to weep.

The boys playing the lute at a marriage Jesus takes to refer to his call to men and women to follow him as disciples. His call was like that of a bridegroom, who invites his followers to the great wedding feast of heaven. The heavenly Banquet is the final destiny to which he is calling his disciples.

Likewise, the singing of the sad songs by the girls refers not to the call of Jesus but of John the Baptist. He didn’t call people to rejoicing

but to “prepare the way of the Lord, to make straight his paths.”

But how did the crowd of people react to these two different calls? With indifference. Nothing moved them. They declined both the festive invitation of Jesus and the penitential summons of John the Baptist. The crowd found fault with both of them, and so did nothing.

They called Jesus a drunkard for rejoicing; and they said John was possessed by a demon when he called for their conversion.

What’s going on here? Jesus is telling us something about ourselves and our reaction to the Good News. We are so often cold and don’t care. No matter how God sends us the message – in our conscience, through others, by his Word in Scripture or by attending Mass – nothing really makes much difference.

In other words, no matter what or how God invites us to the fuller life and light he offers, we can always find a reason to ignore it or reject it.

This indifference is the opposite attitude we should pray for during the upcoming Novena. Let’s remember that we are preparing to celebrate that the Lord, in his goodness and mercy, has done something wonderful, earth-shattering, game-changing for us in *giving* us his Son. Even if we have become a little indifferent to the marvel of his Birth, following along the way of the Simbang Gabi is a privileged way truly to prepare for this wonderful celebration

Conclusion

Dear brothers and sisters: let us pray that the Simbang Gabi Novena will reawaken in many hearts and souls a sense of hope and gratitude for God's great gift to us in his Son born of the Virgin Mary. May you, dear representatives, help to make your parish communities alive to the wonder that we celebrate in the great feast of Christmas.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver