

Dear brother priests, consecrated women and men, parishioners and friends of the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement:

Introduction

This evening we are gathered to give thanks to the Lord and bid farewell for the shining witness and generous service of the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement in the Archdiocese of Vancouver. For 85 years they have been a gentle, yet determined, presence of God's love in our midst. Dear Sisters: we are so very grateful that you shared your life and ministry to God's People among us, with us and for us. Those gathered here to pray with you these evenings, among whom are numerous volunteers whom you inspired and invited to share your work, represent the thousands upon thousands of women, men and children you have touched over the years.

Since your arrival in what was then the small city of Vancouver in 1926, you have turned your Franciscan charism of serving the poor to many different apostolic endeavours. You carried out all of them with simplicity and joy, responding to the needs of the Church and society as dictated by the "signs of the times" and always with a keen sense of being instruments of God's justice and peace. As a missionary congregation, you fulfilled your Foundress's insistence that all work be "rich in love of God, one another and all people."

Here in the Archdiocese of Vancouver you have ministered to the sick, clothed the naked, fed countless of the hungry, visited the

imprisoned, taken in orphans and the homeless, taught the young and the old, and met the needs of immigrants, especially the Japanese community whom you accompanied in their time of great trial during the Second World War. Your doors were open to all, and everyone was always awarded the dignity, respect and love worthy of God's children. That is why you have been so dearly loved, and that is why your memory will long be cherished by the people of British Columbia.

I would also like to thank you for giving voice to the poor, the marginalized and all those who are victims of greed and injustice. True to your Religious community's desire that "all may be one" (Jn 17:11), again and again you have reminded us that the path of reconciliation – of being "at one" with God and our brothers and sisters – entails a passionate commitment to justice in our striving to build in our world at least a glimmer of a civilization of love and a culture of life.

Indeed, your message has been that of St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans proclaimed in today's second reading: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2). Following the experience of the Prophet Jeremiah from whom we heard in today's first reading, you felt the presence of God "like a burning fire" and could not help but tell the whole of the Good News of our salvation in Christ, a Gospel which includes a clear

and courageous proclamation of the Church's social doctrine.

Dear Sisters: we are all saddened that your mission among us is coming to an end. It is, no doubt, as painful to you as it is to us. Yet we give thanks to God that, in his merciful Providence, he led you to Vancouver to be for him and for us "a living sacrifice" (Rom 12:1) of praise and service. In the great community of God's family, each of us individually and with others, has a definite mission to carry out in the Body of Christ. But no particular mission has a claim to permanence. We are all pilgrims journeying to the Father's house, with no "lasting city" in this world. You have done as the Lord asked you to do.

Like St. Paul, you have fought the good fight and now, here at least, you have finished the race; above all you have kept the faith and shared it with us (cf. 2 Tim 4:7). So it is in the communion of Saints; so it is in the life of the Church. We thank the Lord for letting you serve him and us as he desires.

Your mission – like the Church's – will, however, endure. What you have planted will continue to bear abundant fruit. Your mission of being with and serving the poor in the Downtown Eastside is not being abandoned. By no means! Franciscan brown will be followed by the blue and white of the Missionary Sisters of Charity, who are themselves dedicated to serving the "poorest of the poor." And – after a period of evaluation of how best to continue which of the many ministries you

have carried out in our local Church – the Archdiocese is committed to strengthening its presence in this area of the City.

Now I would like to say a few words about today's Gospel in which the demands and cost of being a follower of Jesus are clearly presented to us.

Gospel

Last Sunday, we heard Peter's great profession of faith in Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16) and his being called the "Rock" upon whom the Lord would build his Church and to whom he entrusted the keys of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt 16:18-19). Then comes this disappointing sequel narrated in today's Gospel.

Jesus lays out what is about to happen to himself and to those who follow him. He tells his disciples that he will "undergo great suffering" (Mt 16:21). Peter protests. With his new authority, he took Jesus aside to rebuke him. The Apostle has his own ideas about what being the "Messiah" means: the Romans would be swept into the sea, the temple would be cleansed from corruption and true worship would be restored. For Peter, all talk of suffering and death diminished the status of Jesus as the Messiah, that of his disciples, and of his own newly-granted authority in the group. He figured it was time to talk some sense into his Teacher and attempts to change Jesus' mind. Perhaps he feared that

Jesus' announcement of his death might also dishearten his followers.¹

Peter has gone from a confession of faith to a babble based on human standards and expectations. The one whom Jesus had called "Rock" is now called "Satan" (Mt 16:23); he has now become an obstacle, a stumbling block, on the path Jesus is walking: "for you are thinking not as God does, but as humans do" (Mt 16:23).

Peter tempts Jesus to avoid pain in doing God's will. After all isn't Jesus the Messiah and Son of God? Peter is trying to subvert the divine plan. When Peter hears his Master talk about suffering and being put to death, he cannot accept it. The Apostle wants to eliminate what appears to him to be weakness, vulnerability; he wants to eliminate what, in his way of measuring, is unattractive, perhaps even repulsive. In fact, Peter is acting precisely opposite to Paul's imperative in today's second reading: "Do not be conformed to this world" (Rom 12:2).

Commenting on this attitude of Peter, Pope Benedict reminds us that this is a temptation for all of us – to want Jesus to be conformed to this world and use worldly power to achieve his ends:

¹ Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 152.

Peter wanted as Messiah a “divine man” who would fulfil the expectations of the people by imposing his power upon them all: we would also like the Lord to impose his power and transform the world instantly. Jesus presented himself as a “human God,” the Servant of God, who turned the crowd’s expectations upside-down by taking a path of humility and suffering.²

This is always the choice before us, a lesson to be learned over and over again: to give priority to our own expectations and those of the world and thereby reject Jesus, even if not directly, or to accept Jesus in the truth of his mission of suffering and death, setting aside our all too human expectations.

Jesus also tells us that to share in the mystery of Redemption every disciple of his must deny himself, take up his cross and follow him. He demands a commitment of faith that is ready to embrace God’s will wherever it leads. This call is backed by a promise that those who lose their lives for his sake, out of love for him, will find it.

² Benedict XVI, General Audience (16 May 2006).

It is not enough for us to confess our faith in Jesus as Peter did on the road to Caesarea Philippi. We must also follow him; that is, we must learn from him and take his path. Anything else is unworthy. It is not for us to show Jesus the way; he takes the way shown him by the Father, and we are called to follow him, and not dictate the terms of our discipleship! “God chooses the way of the transformation of hearts in suffering and in humility. And we, like Peter, must convert, over and over again. We must follow Jesus and not go before him: it is he who shows us the way.”³ Indeed, he is “the way, and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6).

Not just for Peter, but also for us, the way of the cross – our cross, the denial of self – is always hard to accept. Instinct impels us to avoid it, and the tempter leads us to believe that it is wiser to be concerned with saving ourselves rather than losing our life through faithfulness to the Son of God made man.⁴

To “deny” ourselves does not mean to lose our identity; nor is this an exhortation to doing penance. Rather, it means that followers of Christ must live for others, just as the Master did. It means to say “no” to self in a radical way, refusing to make our “self” the centre of our

³ Benedict XVI, General Audience (16 May 2006).

⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily (29 June 2007).

world. Self-centred people are forever pampering, indulging, arranging everything for his or her own advantage, comfort and pleasure.

They are closed in upon themselves and so closed to others. To deny self is, therefore, to refuse to be self-centred, self-seeking, self-indulgent and closed to others.

Those who deny self to follow Jesus make him the centre of their lives. To deny self is to die to self in order to live for God. It is to say with St. Paul, “and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. . . . who loved me, and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:20).

Thus, to deny self is far more radical than merely giving up fattening foods, or sacrificing some little pleasure. It is giving up one’s sinful self, which is a false self. To deny self in this radical way is to find one’s true self, – to find life (cf. Mt 16:25) – because we become our true self only in loving relationships with others. The person who does not love others dies, for we cannot live without love. The fullness of life is openness to God and others in loving relationships. By dying to self, one comes alive in a richer, more abundant way. Jesus said, “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). This is the paradox: we gain our “life” by giving it away – just as Jesus did, and just as the Franciscan Sisters have done in our midst.

Conclusion

As we now continue this Eucharist, let us thank the Lord for

making our lives “more abundant” by the presence of the Sisters of the Atonement, thanking him mightily for sharing their gifts and mission with us and asking that we might all become more faithful disciples of Jesus by giving our lives entirely to him. Amen.

+J. Michael Miller, CSB
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