

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Vespers, 3rd Week of Lent; Cathedral of St. Joseph

Vespers, 3rd Week of Lent

Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston Benefactors

Cathedral of St. Joseph

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to join with you this evening for Solemn Vespers here in the beautiful Cathedral of Saint Joseph. I am delighted to have the opportunity to express my deepest thanks for your love and generosity for your support of the Church's mission – a mission to proclaim the Gospel, educate the young, and serve the needy throughout the State of West Virginia. Our prayer together and the gathering that will follow is one way for me as your “interim pastor” to meet you personally and to say how much your generosity means – not only to me and to my co-workers – but also to the many people who experience palpably the love of Christ in ministries of faith, worship, and service – in parishes and schools – and in an array of charitable ministries and social services. And it is my hope and prayer that you find joy and satisfaction in extending your charity and love by supporting these ministries.

I also recognize that this is no ordinary time in the life of the Church. You are sustaining your generosity as the whole Church – and indeed the Diocese of Wheeling – Charleston – is going through what more than one writer has called “its long Lent”. Lent is a time of reckoning, a time of taking stock and owning up to responsibility; Lent is a time of making wrongs right; Lent is a time not only to change our external conduct but to purify our hearts through prayer, self-denial, and charity. And so, it is fair to think of this time of crisis in the Church's life as ‘a long Lent’ so long as this time of reckoning leads to a genuine purification both of the Church itself and its leadership. It is for this intention that I pray daily and I trust that you do likewise.

The Enormity of the Task

But I'll confess, it sometimes seems overwhelming, especially when there's been a steady stream of bad news, as had been the case beginning last August, including today's news. Indeed, this is not the first time the Church has faced the need for reform; there is even an ancient saying that runs like this: "ecclesia semper reformanda" – that is, "the Church must always be undergoing reform, purification" – not because the Church isn't inherently holy but because we who lead and populate the Church sometimes are not.

Previous generations who faced the need to reform the Church also felt overwhelmed. I think of the trials and tribulations of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross when in the 16th century they undertook the task of reforming the Carmelite Order. I think of the interior strength St. Catherine of Siena needed to speak frankly and boldly to the Popes of the 14th century telling them that they needed to leave Avignon and return to Rome – or of the headwinds faced by Pope St. Pius V in the 16th century when he undertook the task of implementing the reforms of the Council of Trent.

But if we think of reforming the Church as something we must do, unaided by God's grace and as isolated individuals – it is overwhelming – and I would tell you it's well-nigh impossible. But the Psalms we just prayed and the reading we just heard tell a different story. We are not alone. God is with us. And nothing is impossible for God.

The Psalms and Reading

First, this night we prayed, "Those that sow in tears will reap in joy." This psalm tells of the sorrow the people of Israel experienced in exile. They were in a foreign land; they were in a state of bondage. In sorrow they planted their crops but their harvest was one of joy. But the Lord in his goodness and mercy delivered them: "When the Lord delivered Zion from bondage, it seemed like a dream!" It is always with sorrow and contrition that we reform our lives and our Church but it is the Lord who delivers us and gives us a joy that takes us by surprise.

In tonight's second Psalm, 127, we sang: "If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labor." In other words, you and I, if we would look forward to the

future in hope, must rely on God's grace to help us in the work of rebuilding the Church. We can work as hard, plan carefully, put good policies in place, be transparent and accountable to God, to one another, and to society - but unless we rely totally on the grace of the Holy Spirit, we will not be renewed in Christ and be that Church filled with spirit and life. Anyone who has been an agent of renewal in the Church's long history has confessed his or her utter dependence upon the Lord's goodness and mercy.

In the canticle, taken from Paul's letter to the Colossians, we give thanks for God for delivering us "from the kingdom of darkness" and bringing us "into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins." The endless capacity of the Church to be renewed in every age is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ celebrated in the Eucharist. In dying to destroy our sin and in rising to restore our life, Jesus bequeathed to us in the Holy Spirit a love that is stronger than sin and more powerful than death. This is the hope we cling to and this is the source of our renewal.

That is why St. Paul wrote to the Philippians and to us saying that "it is God who, in his good will toward [us] begets in [us] any measure of desire or achievement." When God touches our soul and inflames it with his love, when our faith comes alive perhaps as never before and we band together, then the daunting seems doable; the impossible, possible.

Conclusion

Truly do I thank you for the constancy of your support and prayers which are instrument in writing a new chapter of goodness and grace in the history of the Diocese of Wheeling - Charleston as with hopeful hearts we prayerfully await the appointment and arrival of a new bishop, a good and loving shepherd who will bring us together, protect us from danger, fill our hearts with love, and lead us to Christ - to Christ who lives and reigns with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.