

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception

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Including Pre-World Youth Day Pilgrims

Aug. 25, 2018

Joy and Hope, Grief and Anguish

When we come to Mass, we listen for a word that will inspire, encourage, console, and direct us, no matter what our particular situation might be, no matter what our hope and joy, grief and anguish might be. With us this evening, for example, is the Archbishop of Panama, Archbishop Jose Domingo Ulloa Mediate. He and I have had the privilege of accompanying young people on pilgrimage today. These are young people from this area who will be heading to Panama next January for World Youth Day.

Since Washington is a city of monuments, that's what we did: we visited places like the Washington Monument and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial as well as other places that symbolize what is best in our society. Dear young people: We came not as tourists but as pilgrims attentive to God's Word, as pilgrims with your lives all ahead of you, as young people filled with hope and joy. You walked, seeking to follow the Lord, to be part of the Church, and to help create a society that is just, peaceful, and compassionate. All of us here this evening should share in your hope and joy. In spite of many obstacles, you not only remain with the Lord and his Church, but also seek to root your lives deeply in the Catholic faith.

How wonderful it would be if we could always arrive for Mass with only joy and hope. Yet most of us, myself included, celebrate this Mass with grief and anguish, a

grief and an anguish brought about by the sexual abuse crisis that continues to trouble deeply even the most faithful of Catholics, in spite of all that has been done in the last decades to create safe environments in the Church and to purify and strengthen seminary formation. It is a crisis that has left many victims in its wake, a crisis brought about by the deeply sinful behavior of many clerics, and by the failure of some bishops to address such behavior with thoroughness and candor. This crisis of trust and of leadership has left us reeling, and has indeed put into our hearts, not joy and hope, but grief and anguish. As a bishop, I am deeply humbled by such abject failure as I stand before you tonight, and not only humbled but haunted by the enormity and evil of this crisis. As best I can, I shall strive to listen to and walk with the laity in searching for and implementing meaningful and further reforms. Even so, what might the Word of God say to us tonight, in the midst of a grief and anguish likely to remain with us for a long time to come? How does God's Word challenge us, enlighten us, & direct us at the present moment?

Ephesians

In search of an answer, let us turn to our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It is a passage which is foundational to the Church's understanding of marriage. It is also a passage which is foundational for understanding what the Church is. Even if some of St. Paul's language in the 5th chapter of Ephesians seems antiquated, he is really describing is the mutual love, deference, & respect of husbands and wives, a love that is deep, pervasive, and personal, a love that lasts through thick and thin, just like Jesus' love for his Bride, which is the Church. "Husbands," St. Paul says, "love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church" - with a love that is total and sacrificial. As members of the Church, that is how Jesus loves us. This is what we encounter and celebrate in the Eucharist, the Bread of Life.

For those of you who are married, this reading is wonderful passage to reflect on and pray about. But this evening I'd like to stress the point that Christ loves the Church. This may not be an easy message to hear at a time when the sins of its leaders have rendered the Church "un-loveable". Social media is filled with stories of people who say why they are leaving the Church, and sadly, with fewer stories of people who say why they are staying. When it's all said and done, though, there is one ultimate reason for staying: Christ loves his Church. Christ loves the Church not

only its purest and most beautiful expressions, not only its spirituality and its saints – but also its sinners – even the worst – and indeed in its perpetually flawed institutional form, always in need of reform. What an awful mess we who lead the Church can make of things. Nonetheless Christ still loves the Church even more than a good, virtuous, self-sacrificing husband loves his wife and children. And in her deepest identity, the Church loves Christ as a wife loves her husband and in her union with Christ, the Church loves each of us. Which is why the abuse of the innocent and vulnerable is a monstrous betrayal. What is why the casting of a blind eye on such betrayal is itself monstrous. It is a betrayal of the very love that lies at the heart of salvation history. It is of this betrayal that we, your bishops, need to repent, a repentance that signals not just a change of heart and attitude but further change in how things are done.

A Moment of Decision

Both the reading from the Book of Joshua and the Bread of Life Discourse from the Gospel of John share a similar question. Joshua challenges the people with a question at the heart of the Covenant: Reminding the people of how God delivered them from slavery and death in Egypt, he says: ‘Decide whom you will serve. Will you serve the living God or will you serve the gods of the surrounding cultures?’ The gods of our surrounding culture tell that it’s a no-brainer not only to leave the Church but even to forsake the God who gave us the Church and who still loves the Church and us, its members. This is the drama playing out in many hearts and around many kitchen tables.

In the Bread of Life Discourse, Jesus tells the people that He is the Bread of Life and that they cannot have eternal life unless they eat his Body and drink his Blood. Among his disciples Jesus’s words are met with disbelief, disbelief that he is the living Word of God in the flesh, the One who can give himself to us so completely and so intimately. Many walk away. Many go back to their former way of life. Jesus then puts to the Apostles a question similar to Joshua’s: ‘What about you? Will you walk away?’ Peter, who often misunderstood Jesus and would deny him in his Passion, answers: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life.”

How I wish I could pose the question of Joshua and Jesus in another context – belief in the New Covenant sealed by the flesh and blood of the living Savior. Instead, I must ask of myself and of you the same question, amid the idolatry of sin and the misuse of power that has wormed its way into the Church: ‘What about you? Will you walk away?’ Like Peter prior to Pentecost, I cannot reply out of a storehouse of virtue. It is only because the Lord loves the Church and loves each of you, that I can reply: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!” Please, God, may you and your families find it in your hearts to say the same. May God bless you and keep you always in his love!