

# Focus Missionary Mass

## **Introduction: On the Plane**

Yesterday, coming down here on the plane from Baltimore, I realized that over half the passengers were on their way to the Seek Conference. Because I boarded the plane in a black suit and a Roman collar, someone said to me, “Happy to see you, Father. Now I know we’ll be safe.” It’s true, I do pray on planes but I can also genuinely say that I was happy to be way up there with so many seekers, with so many of you, and I’m glad to be with all of you today as our gathering gets underway. With you, I am also a fellow seeker because, a little later, I’ll be wandering around this enormous hotel looking for my hotel room.

In the Gospel Jesus says to you and me, “Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened!” You and I have come here in search of a deeper relationship with Jesus. We’ve come because in the words of Pope Francis we want to anchor our lives in “... a vital, personal, authentic, and solid relationship with Christ.” Maybe we are seeking like the woman Jesus describes in the Gospel who swept her house in search of a lost coin. Could it be we’re looking to sweep our hearts clean so that we can find the one thing we’re missing, namely, a deeper and more loving relationship with the Lord? Or maybe we are like the merchant who went looking for fine pearls, and when he found one that was really valuable, he sold all he had to buy it. Could it be that we are ready to leave behind what we once thought of as valuable for the one treasure with ultimate value, viz., our relationship with the Christ?

We are not the only ones who are seeking. Jesus said that where two or three are gathered in his name, he’d be there – so imagine how intensely present He is right now with nearly 10,000 of us gathered to celebrate the Eucharist! Let us make no mistake: the Lord has come in search of us. That’s what Christmas is about: God’s Son assumed our human nature – so as to come into the world as the Good Shepherd in search of straying humanity, searching for you and for me, seeking only our love. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock,” Jesus says, and we can believe right now he’s standing at the door of our hearts.

## **The Strap of Whose Sandals ...**

In the Gospel just proclaimed we once again meet John the Baptist. It is the same

Gospel passage the Church proclaimed on Gaudete Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent, so near to the Feast of Christmas. Now that we have celebrated the Solemnity of the Lord's Birth, the Church invites us to revisit John the Baptist, so that we can learn again how to seek the Lord and how to welcome him into our hearts, and when we've done this, to proclaim him lovingly and effectively.

As the Gospel passage opens, John the Baptist is being quizzed by priests and Levites: 'Who are you, anyway?' - 'Are you the Christ?' 'Are you the long-awaited Messiah?' John denied that he was the Christ, the anointed of God, or that he was the reincarnation of one of the prophets. Hopefully no one on your college campuses has asked you if you're the Messiah, but if you are known to be a practicing Catholic, you may have been asked something like, "Who are you, anyway?" Or if your way of life, your moral decisions, differ from those around you, maybe the question goes like this: "Who do you think you are?"

When pressed further, John identified himself in the words of Isaiah the prophet: "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert: make straight the way of the Lord." As you seek the Lord and invite him to make inroads into your heart, you sometimes may feel like a voice in the desert, a voice in the wilderness. The wilderness where you seek to live as a disciple is not the desert of Judea, as it was for John the Baptist. It's the frontier where our faith in Christ meets the prevailing culture; it's where many, some on your own college campuses, seek to marginalize faith, even to the point of restricting freedom of religion, speech, and assembly. Never give in to discouragement. As FOCUS has demonstrated many times, the Lord has a way of showing up powerfully in the wilderness, wherever it may be.

Now, after the priests and Levites were finished with John, the Pharisees showed up. 'If you're not the Christ or one of the prophets,' they asked him, 'why do you baptize?' And John answered: "I baptize with water but one is to come after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." Here and throughout this Gospel passage, John the Baptist lays out for me and you a fundamental condition for being a seeker and a disciple: and that's reverential awe coupled with joyful humility. John the Baptist could easily have passed himself off as the Messiah. He had credibility; he had a following; everyone was attracted to him. But John made it clear: he was not the Word but the voice, not the Sun but the lamp; not the Bridegroom, but the

friend. Our discipleship, our vocations, our lives belong not to us but to Christ. Only if we open our hearts to the Lord with humility will we joyfully reflect the His truth and love to those around us.

### **The Spirit Teaches Us Everything**

Today's first reading from the First Letter of John speaks of the anointing we have received, namely, the Holy Spirit, it says, "His anointing teaches you about everything, and is true and not false; just as it taught you, remain in him." The Holy Spirit we received in Baptism and Confirmation is at work in our hearts, so that, in our inmost being, a door will open up to God, permitting him to enter and take possession of us. It is the Spirit who prompts us to seek Jesus, who helps us find him, and then gives us the humility, courage, and wisdom we need to proclaim him.

After all, the closer we come to God for the purpose of testifying to him, the more clearly we see the distance between God and ourselves, the more we realize our complete dependence upon the Lord. And the more space we open up in our lives for God the more we become a simple, uncomplicated instrument for God's purposes: 'a voice crying in the desert' or, in the case of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as God's Son began to dwell in her womb, she saw herself as His 'lowly handmaid'.

The humility the Lord asks of his followers is not weakness; it does not signal a lack of confidence in the truth and beauty of the Gospel or an unwillingness to lead others from unbelief to faith. What it does entail and demand of us is a reverential awe, coupled with a clearheaded and joyful openness to the Lord, who, then, can accomplish *in* and *through* us 'immeasurably more than we could ever ask or imagine' (cf. Eph. 3:20).

### **Two By Two**

Let me say one more thing about seeking the Lord & bearing witness to Him & it's this: you and I, we shouldn't try to go it alone, we need each other. The two saints we celebrate today illustrate this for us, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzen, not exactly household names. Both were born in the year 330; and came from a place known as Cappadocia in modern-day Turkey. Both were learned, both tried living as hermits, and both became bishops. And most of all, the two of them were friends. They supported each other in their quest for holiness and in all the

challenges that come with discipleship and ministry.

Look around you today. You are not alone. All over our country, all over the world, there are young people seeking to grow in faith, seeking to grow in discipleship, and seeking their vocation from God. Because of your faith, you have an instant connection with those around you today, those who are already your friends and those you've never met before. Not for nothing did Jesus send out his disciples two-by-two; not for nothing did Jesus establish the network we call the Church. "... I have called you friends," Jesus says to us, "because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15).

In that friendship, our friendship with Jesus and one another, may we seek and find, may we knock and have the door opened! God bless you and keep you always in His love!