

# Friday 3rd Week of Lent: Opening Mass, Mid-Atlantic Congress

## **I. Introduction**

We have gathered for the Mid-Atlantic Congress at an extraordinary time in the life of the Church. As we gather to pray, listen to various talks, take part in break-out sessions, and become familiar with so many resources for growth in our lives of faith and in the service to the Church, - we are focused on the question of leadership in the life of the Church. When that theme was chosen little did we imagine this Congress would coincide with the process of choosing a new Pope to lead the whole Church in truth and love.

We'd be living under a rock if we were to be unaware of the torrents of discussion and debate which this time of transition has provoked. It seems everyone has an opinion about the leadership qualities that the new pontiff ought to have in one measure or another. Many also are the discussions about what ought to change in the Church, discussions which I shall refrain from rehearsing here, except to urge that we all pray intensely for the Church in these days, most especially for the College of Cardinals charged with electing a new Pope.

Once Mother Teresa was asked by an interviewer what should most change in the life of the Church? Her answer was, "You and I!" In the same vein, G. K. Chesterton entered an essay contest and the subject was "What's wrong the world?" His essay consisted of a few words: "Gentlemen, I am." Sincerely, G. K. Chesterton. He handily won the contest. So in the midst of all these discussions, let us begin not with the future Pope or the College of Cardinals but rather with ourselves.

## **II. Repentance and Leadership**

This time of transition in the Church's life and our conference take place in the midst of Lent, a time of year when the word "repent" stands front and center. For example, in today's first reading from Hosea, the Lord calls us to repentance, and even puts on our lips the words we ought to say: "Return...to the Lord your God; you have collapsed through your guilt. Take with you words and return to the Lord; Say to him, "Forgive all iniquity, and receive what is good, that we may render as

offerings the bullocks from our stalls.”

When Jesus’ call “repent and believe in the Gospel” reaches our ears, what thoughts run through our minds and hearts? Surely we think of the wrong we have done, our failure to love God and neighbor. But the word, “repent”, calls for more than a superficial recounting of our sins. As the root of the word suggests, when we “repent” we “rethink” – *io penso*... we rethink what is most fundamental in our lives, namely, our relationship with God and our neighbor.

The reading from Hosea alerts us to significant spiritual dangers we face in serving the church; How easily we can substitute our network of friends and alliances for an authentic relationship with the living God. How easily we can substitute associating with the like-minded as a surrogate for believing in and living the Gospel without compromise... and reaching out to all in truth and love. How easily we can fall into worshipping the works of our hands. It isn’t that any of us are inclined to create a molten calf but many of us are given to developing strategic plans and creating programs which, while they may be good and necessary, can become not the means but ends in themselves.

Repentance and leadership go hand in hand and on many levels. E.g., it is necessary that every leader manifest a healthy degree of self-awareness. Leaders must know their talents and strengths but also their weaknesses and sins. No one wants to follow a person who does not know in what direction his or her life is headed. Yet something more than self-awareness is needed. Leaders need to have genuine humility before their God. This was touchingly demonstrated in the decision of Benedict XVI to bring his pontificate to end and to begin a life of prayer for us all. It was hard to miss his humanity and his humility. Self-awareness and humility open the door to what is most needed in anyone who would accept a position of leadership and service in the Church: a relationship of love, friendship, with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not enough for anyone who leads in the Church to know *about* Jesus Christ: It is imperative for those who would lead to know the Lord himself, and to know him deeply through Word, Sacrament, coupled with a life of personal prayer and daily charity. It is imperative for any who would lead in the Church to be rooted in the truth and love that is the Lord Jesus Christ, a living truth available to us in the Word of God as it comes to us through the Church’s teaching & sacramental life.

### **III. Leadership and Friendship with Christ**

With that observation we are brought to the threshold of today's Gospel. Here we meet Jesus in conversation with a leader, one of the scribes, a man of integrity, who truly wanted to understand the heart of his vocation. That is why he asked Jesus "Which is the first of all the commandments." Jesus told scribe what the God who is love wants of us. He wants his love for us to be met with a love of our own: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength." Jesus quickly adds that the second commandment is like the first: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The scribe realized that this was the true sacrifice of praise God is looking for. And the beloved Apostle John would come one day to realize that Jesus had tied together love of God and love of neighbor in an unbreakable bond. He would ask how one could claim to love the God we cannot see while hating the neighbor whom we can. Indeed, John teaches us that "love of neighbor is a path that leads to an encounter with God while closing our eyes to our neighbor blinds us to God" (DCE, no. 16).

Self-awareness, conversion from sin, humility, coupled with true sense of dependence on God's grace – these are conditions that allow for the flourishing of our baptismal vocation to love, to lead by putting ourselves at the service of a truth and love larger than ourselves, larger than our personal views, our likes and dislikes, our preferences. The New Evangelization demands first and foremost that we truly encounter in our lives of faith and prayer the living Christ, that his teaching and his redeeming love truly find a place in our hearts, so that we can see others with the eyes of Christ and thus be the Lord's instruments in bringing them home – home to the Lord, home to the Church, home to a life of grace.

### **IV. Conclusion**

So while conversation and controversy swirl about us in these days, let us resolve to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, "the leader and the perfecter of faith" (Hebrews 12:2). When by word and witness it becomes clear to those we seek to lead and serve that it is not we who love but Christ who lives in us, and that we have come to love what God loves and to reject what he rejects – then it is that those about us will be attracted to the truth, beauty, and joy of the Gospel of Christ and seek to enter the Church's communion of life and love modeled on and rooted in the communion of life

and love that is the Trinity. To whom be glory, honor, and praise, now and forevermore. Amen.