

Mid-Atlantic Congress Votive Mass

Introduction

Good afternoon! I hope you are enjoying the Mid-Atlantic Congress so far! And I am delighted to be with all of you as evening draws near to celebrate this Votive Mass for Evangelization.

You may have seen that the Vatican recently issued a new directory or guide for preaching. The headline that went along with this new directory is this: “Homilies should not be long and boring.” So I thought this afternoon I would try for short and boring!

So let’s get right to it. In a Votive Mass for Evangelization, it isn’t too surprising to find that the Scripture readings are all about spreading the Gospel, all about the missionary mandate the Apostles received from the Lord, a mandate in which all of us share, in our day and age. In fact, I think today’s Scripture readings tell us three things: 1) The Goal; 2) the Method; and 3) the Means. Let me explain.

The Goal

So what is the goal of evangelization? To answer that, let’s turn to the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah. The words proclaimed to us this afternoon are part of a poem that is thought to have been written when the Chosen People were in the grip of the Babylonian exile. The Prophet witnessed the unprecedented sufferings of God’s people who had lost all the tangible signs of God’s favor. Yet Isaiah sees light at the end of the tunnel. He not only sees liberation and restoration for God’s people, but also sees them as a beacon of light and hope for all the earth. “My house,” God says through the prophet Isaiah, “my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

When we read this passage from Isaiah, maybe our eyes are filled with visions of crowded parking lots on Sunday morning, with standing room only in our churches as if every Sunday were Christmas eve, with a festal ingathering of people from every corner of the parish and beyond. Perhaps our hearts burn with the prospect of the return from exile of the 75% to 80% of Catholics who no longer regularly practice their faith. And rightly we should pray for this, not as idle dreamers but as missionary disciples.

When we hear the words, “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” might we also be reminded of the growing diversity of the Church in the United States, the growing diversity of the dioceses, parishes, and schools where we serve? We have always been and remain a church of immigrants who should have both a heart and a head for welcoming the newly arrived and for allowing the Church to be enriched and strengthened by the languages and cultures that are found in the local churches we represent.

And even as we envision a great ingathering of peoples into vital communities of Word, Worship, and Charity - so also we recognize how difficult it is for many people to make that journey Pope Francis gave us the image of the Church as a field hospital where we minister to the wounds of human existence. So too we are keenly aware of the need ‘for the light of Christ to be brightly visible on the countenance of the Church’ (LG, 1) a light that is too often obscured by our sin, by indifference to the poor, and by what Pope Francis calls “a gray pragmatism” that besets pastoral vitality.

The Method

If the goal is to gather people from every language and nation, truly to be a house of prayer for all peoples, then what is the method? How is this great ingathering to be brought about? St. Paul addresses that question in today’s reading from Romans. He too offers a vision in which there is “no distinction between Jew and Greek”, a vision

in which “everyone who calls upon the Lord’s Name will be saved.” Paul goes on to ask, how will they call upon the Lord’s name, unless they believe? And how will they believe unless they have heard? And how will they hear until the Gospel is preached? “Faith,” he said, “comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.”

No doubt about it, preaching counts. Parishes grow when the Word of God is preached effectively. But effective preaching is not the mere presentation of information or ideas, no matter how important or profound such information or ideas may be. Effective preaching should be engaging; it should be brimming with the attractiveness of the Gospel, that is to say, with the attractiveness of the Person of Christ. It should engage the faith with the struggles and challenges of daily life while offering hope, vision, and fresh strength. And it should draw people not to a set of rules but to a wholly new way of life that can only be lived in communion with Christ, a communion that is achieved in and through the sacraments, most especially the Eucharist, “the source and summit” of the Church’s life.

And what is true of preaching is true of all kinds of formation and instruction. We offer these things not merely as programs or as requirements but rather as those who seek to know, love, and follow the Lord, and as those who have been sent to bear Him witness, not only in what we say but in how we live our lives, including witnessing to the Lord in ways that are decidedly countercultural. As Pope Benedict said, “One who has hope lives differently.” So too, Pope Francis challenges me and you to be missionary disciples, and he does so in the very spirit of what St. Paul has to say to us this afternoon.

The Means

So we know the goal and we know the method. But now, like the first disciples who were amazed and a little terrified, we must ask about the wherewithal to bring this about. Without sufficient ways and means, won’t the vision of Isaiah prove a pipe

dream? And isn't it the case the effective preaching of Paul is a gift given only to a few? Let us we resort to the Gospel passage from St. Luke for an answer to our questions.

The setting for tonight's reading is the appearance of the Risen Lord to the disciples. Jesus shown them that he is not an illusion, not a ghost but rather the Risen One, the One who is "really real". He is really real because of the wounds on his hands and feet but even more so because he in his flesh the invincible life of God is fully manifest. Of course, the disciples are amazed and of course they are terrified. They must have wondered what this meant and what the future held for them. What does Jesus do? He opens the Scriptures for them, helping them to see how it refers to him, especially his death and resurrection, and like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, their hearts must have burning. Jesus tells them that the Good News is to be preached to the earth's ends and that they will be his witnesses. How could this little, under-resourced group ever hope to do any such thing? Only because Jesus said he would send 'the promise of His Father' - only because Jesus said they would be 'clothed with power from on high' - and here Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit, poured forth on Pentecost.

When the disciples heard this they rejoiced and so should we. This afternoon, as the Holy Spirit descends upon gifts of bread and wine, let us ask the same Holy Spirit to make us one and to reignite in our hearts the joy of the Gospel so that we may go forth day after day as the Lord's witnesses and come home rejoicing, carrying their sheaves, producing "abundant fruit, fruit that will last!" May God bless us and keep us always in His love!