

Social Ministry Convocation

Introduction

I am delighted to be with all of you today as we celebrate the 36th annual Archdiocesan Social Ministry Convocation. I warmly welcome all of you who gather from parishes all around the Archdiocese of Baltimore responding to the call to celebrate and to serve. In a special way, I want to you all of you in recognizing and congratulating today's awardees, representing several of our parishes.

As always, I want to thank and recognize Msgr. William Burke for his longstanding leadership in organizing this convocation, but above all for his leadership in advancing the Church's teaching on social justice, not merely theoretically but rather in ways that affect our lives as members of the Church and those we are privileged to serve. Monsignor Burke, thank you!

In thanking Msgr. Burke, let me also say a word of thanks to all those who work with him in organizing this event year after year, including a large group of volunteers. And with you I am grateful to Seton Keough High School for hosting our Convocation each year.

The Joy of the Gospel

This year we have chosen the theme, "The Joy of the Gospel." It is taken from the title of Pope Francis' exhortation in which he lays out a vision not only for his papacy but also for the Church. More than a document, it is a kind of roadmap as we look to the future.

Not only his words but also his own way serving as Bishop of Rome impart fresh joy and fresh hope to Catholics and so many other people of good will. For decades we have been saying that evangelization is the Church's mission and deepest identity. We have been saying that we must be an evangelized and evangelizing people. We have spoken about new methods and a new ardor in rekindling the Gospel in places where once its light shone strong but more recently has begun to flicker and fade. And indeed many heard and answered the call to evangelize, many as unsung heroes in the life of the Church. But far too many others it was business as usual.

Pope Francis did not merely repeat all that has been said since the Council. No, in his person, in his preaching, in his love for the poor, in his passion for justice, he bears convincing witness to that joy, born of the Holy Spirit. It's that joy which comes when we open our hearts to Christ and to the Gospel in the certainty that we are infinitely loved, that his mercies are endless. And then, in joy of that encounter, we find the courage to go well beyond our comfort zone to accompany in love those who search for love, for truth, for justice, for life's most basic necessities.

Pope Francis is calling us all to become missionary disciples. He does not allow any one of us to take our discipleship for granted. He isn't content with our being "good enough" Christians who see our faith merely as an insurance policy for the afterlife or as a means of being comforted amid life's difficulties. He isn't content with a church and with Christians who are "self-referential" because he knows that lives that are self-righteous, self-focused, and self-serving are lives that shun the true transformative power of the Gospel and the Sacraments. When that happens, our relationship with the Lord remains cold and formal and we live our lives devoid of the joy of the Gospel, the joy that comes when we fall in love, as Fr. Pedro Arrupe once said, when fall in love with God in quite an absolute and final way. Only when we open our own hearts to the Lord's mercy will we be messengers of mercy and joy, witnesses to God's love, who are equipped by faith and reason to build a civilization of justice, love & peace. This is the "escape route" God has given us from living only for ourselves; from substituting ideology for faith; from living in a divided church.

The quality of our discipleship has everything to do with the quality of our mission. The Gospel of Mark (which we are reading during this liturgical year) recounts how Jesus sent his disciples out for their first attempt at mission. It was a mission of bearing witness to the Good News of redemption; it was a mission of healing; a mission of reconciliation. The disciples did not go out half-heartedly. They went out with enthusiasm and joy and their joy is palpable in the pages of the Gospel when they return to the Lord to report all they had done. There was much they did not yet understand but their mission was fruitful because they loved the Lord and were close to him. After their mission he invited them to stay with him and pray. It is only in being with the Lord in reading and praying the Scriptures, in making the Eucharist the center of our lives, in availing ourselves of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, that we develop that relationship with the Lord Jesus that gets us up

in the morning and sends us out to the margins.

The Missionary Option

Pope Francis urges us to be missionary disciples not as lone rangers but in the joy of the Church's communion. He recognizes that every work of pastoring, education, charity, and justice needs to be infused with the joy of the Gospel. He calls upon us to make our parishes, schools, and social service programs expressions of a church that listens to the Gospel and proclaims it with joy. He tells us again and again that mercy is the messenger, the best and greatest messenger of the Gospel.

Lumen Gentium said that the light of Christ must shine out visibly from the Church. Clearly the Pope wants mercy to be face of the Church and indeed Jesus is the Father's mercy incarnate. He does not want the Church to be perceived as harsh and impervious, as a thicket of formalities ... yet in the same token he does not want the Church to come down off the Cross by simply giving in to and going along with the ways of the world, by watering down what the Church believes and teaches. For when mercy bypasses truth, it also bypasses love and then loses its capacity to bring people true joy, the joy that comes from the Spirit of truth and love.

Our social teaching often cuts across the grain of our culture in ways that may not always be welcomed in the halls of power, whether it's our defense of unborn life and the frail elderly, or our Gospel driven desire to welcome the stranger, racial justice, peacemaking, or the defense of religious freedom. How important that we pursue justice with the joy of the Gospel. How important that we pursue justice as missionary disciples convinced that the Lord knows us, loves us, cares about us, and walks with us every day to strengthen and enlighten us.

Thanks for being here - may God bless us and keep us always in His love!