

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
SATURDAY OF THE SECOND WEEK OF EASTER
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BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
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Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to the United States, I greet you in the name of Pope Francis during this Easter Season, as you make this pilgrimage as Asian and Pacific Island Catholics to this Basilica. I want to express His Holiness' paternal affection for each of you and to assure you of his closeness and prayers. I thank Msgr. Rossi for his gracious welcome, as well as the Asian and Pacific Catholic Network and the US Bishops' Secretariat for Cultural Diversity in the Church for their efforts in organizing this pilgrimage.

Indeed, looking around this Basilica, we see how wonderful are the gifts of the Spirit, who provides us with great diversity in our nationalities, cultures, devotions and traditions, and who, at the same time, binds in unity in one Faith, worshipping one God, and sharing in the one Eucharistic Banquet. In writing the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke noted how the believers were of "one heart and one mind", sharing all things in common (cf. Acts 4:32). If only this unity could always be preserved!

In today's reading, we hear how difficult this unity is to preserve, with the Hellenists complaining against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected. In focusing on the problem, we might miss a preceding detail offered by Luke: *As the number of disciples continued to grow*. This little sentence fragment is important. Despite opposition from the authorities and outright persecution at the beginning of Acts, the number of disciples increased.

Why? In the first place, it is because evangelization is really the work of God. The Apostles, gathered in prayer with the Virgin Mary in the Cenacle at Pentecost, received an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This allowed them to speak fearlessly and boldly of Jesus and His Resurrection. They did not hesitate to proclaim the name of Jesus and to perform miracles in His Name. They were not only willing, but even rejoiced, to suffer for the sake of His Name. Jesus had told them that they would be His witnesses. Critical to the work of evangelization was the power of God and the

integrity of the witness. Thus, they successfully evangelized, and the number of disciples grew.

Asian Catholics too know persecution. I think of the recent attacks in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, the ongoing persecution of Catholics in some parts of India, the historic struggles of Vietnamese and Chinese Catholics, struggles which continue to this day – to name just a few. Despite persecution, the Church in Asia continues to grow, because of its faithful witnesses. How many men and women have suffered for Jesus, and because of their sacrifices and prayers the Church flourishes. The faith is handed on from generation to generation, and with it, genuine devotion and piety. This handing on of the faith – the tradition – necessarily involves making new disciples, not only among your children but also among your neighbors. This means speaking about what Jesus offers- Life and Mercy – and witnessing to what he offers by treating those around us with the same love and merciful tenderness with which He has treated us.

Thus, the number of disciples grew in the early Church and continues to grow today. Still, with the growth of the number of disciples, a dispute arose between the Hellenists and Hebrews. It is always a challenge to maintain unity amid diversity. Furthermore, the Apostles, because of the demands of charity, were forced to put aside prayer and the ministry of the word. With growth, new pastoral problems emerged. How did they address them?

The Twelve called together the disciples. They made a proposal, choosing seven reputable men, to assist them. They listened to the community and to the Holy Spirit in this matter, and they discerned what to do. This discernment led to action, namely the laying on of hands by the Apostles on these seven, chosen men. They would act as the first deacons of the Church. This process is how the Church ought to function – in a synodal way.

Pope Francis speaks repeatedly of his desire for a synodal Church – a Church that walks together. There are clearly defined roles in the process, but the community prays, listens, discerns, subjects their proposal to authority, and finally, action is taken. What is the result of this synodal activity by the early Church? *The word of God continued to spread and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly.*

The spreading of the Word of God and the increase in disciples, especially through the waters of baptism, represents a great outpouring of the Mercy of God. Pope Francis has taught us that “Mercy cannot be a mere parenthesis in the life of the Church; it constitutes her very existence, through which the profound truths of

the Gospel are made manifest and tangible. Everything is revealed in mercy; everything is resolved in the merciful love of the Father.” (Pope Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, 20 November 2016, 1)

The outpouring of the Spirit on the Apostles, allowing them to discern, with the community, the way forward, was a loving and merciful act of God. Indeed, everything is resolved in the merciful love of the Father. But the gift of mercy invites a response. The Holy Father calls on us to show mercy and to creatively advance the Gospel and the Kingdom.

Just as it seems that the Church is dying in the West, the Churches in Asia seem to be flourishing, and many of the offspring of those Churches come here to this land to enrich it and to share their stories of faith. The Holy Father calls on you to seize this moment, writing:

“Now is the time to unleash the creativity of mercy, to bring about new undertakings, the fruit of grace. The Church today needs to tell of those “many other signs” that Jesus worked, which “are not written”, so that they too may become an eloquent expression of the fruitfulness of the love of Christ and of the community that draws life from Him. Two thousand years have passed, yet works of mercy continue to make God’s goodness visible.” (Ibid., 18)

How fitting it is then that you have gathered here – a visible sign of the Presence of Christ – in the Church and in the world! Your presence indicates a willingness to witness publicly to His Mercy! How right it is that we are celebrating a Mass in honor of Mary, our Mother and Queen of Mercy.

Mary is not only a Mother to us, but she is a model of discipleship. She teaches us in the Mystery of the Annunciation to be open to God’s Spirit. She was overshadowed by the Spirit, and so the Word became Flesh in her womb! God’s mercy was carried within her. She could not contain her joy and went as a missionary to her kinswoman Elizabeth, and John the Baptist leapt for joy in the womb. The Mercy of God brings joy. When she gave birth to her Child, the shepherds and the Magi were overjoyed, seeing Mercy in the Flesh. Jesus comes to us through Mary.

We see this truth again at the Wedding Feast of Cana. Mary shows mercy to the couple and tells others: *Do whatever He tells you*. Throughout her life as a disciple, Mary journeyed with her Son, standing faithfully by the foot of the Cross, when her Son was crucified for the forgiveness of sins and for our salvation. She

witnessed Mercy on the Cross, and she continued to gather in prayer, in communion with the Apostles, at the time of Pentecost.

How blessed we are to have Mary as our Mother, a mother who never fails to intercede for her children! When difficulties arise, we have confidence that we can turn to her to see more clearly the face of her Son. When we cannot see the way forward, we look to her example. She does not panic. She prays. She remains open to the Spirit. She listens, discerns, and acts. Mary modeled the way of being a disciple and being a Church to the Apostles, and when faced with a crisis, they followed her example. And, what happened? *The word of God continued to spread and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly.*

You have come from the different lands of Asia, because missionaries once brought you the word of God, aided by the Spirit and the prayers of the Virgin. Now it is your turn to be creative missionaries in this land – enriching it with the gifts of the Spirit, your piety and devotions, your fidelity and your witness to the Merciful Love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Mary! It is a big task, but as Jesus says, “*Do not be afraid. It is I.*”

Yes, you have made this pilgrimage today, but be assured that He walks with you every day of your life!