

HISPANIC BISHOPS' PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY LAND
HOLY MASS AT THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE
HOMILY OF THE MOST REVEREND PLACIDO RODRIGUEZ
January 22, 2018

Dear disciples and apostles of Jesus Christ, who brings peace and reconciliation:

By God's Providence, we find ourselves on this Pilgrimage of Prayer, at the Garden of Gethsemane, as disciples and missionary apostles of Jesus Christ, keeping Him company in His Garden prayer before His Heavenly Father, on the night before He suffered for our salvation. May we, as missionary pilgrims for peace, discover our calling to prayer, and bring peace for all peoples, beginning in Jerusalem, the beloved city of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are so many ways one can take in our considerations when we are in such a privileged place as Gethsemane, that it is hard to settle on one topic. I encourage you to find your own considerations. To help you, I'll start:

In the Book of Genesis, our salvation history begins in a garden, the Garden of Eden, where fullness of peace reigned, and no sin had yet entered the world, and where Adam and Eve enjoyed God's presence and company. Through the cunning and deceitfulness of the Devil, sin entered into the Garden of Eden. Yet, in this very setting, the promise of salvation was proclaimed, and was repeated through history, so that we would not despair of our salvation.

Now, it is in the very Garden of Gethsemane, where the "seed" of a woman, Mary of Nazareth, confronts this same evil that ruined the first Garden of Eden for us. Jesus is fully aware that He is confronting this same Evil: In fact, Jesus recognizes that the Evil One had already entered into Judas Iscariot, ready to betray Him. So, Jesus, in His self-surrender to the will of the Father, and ready to drink of the Chalice He is given to drink, finds Himself in this Garden of Gethsemane, the very same garden that put an end to Evil, and reverses the first Garden of Eden.

We, as pilgrims for the peace of Jerusalem and for the rest of the world, have come to the right place for a prayer for peace. This is the epicenter for peace, where Jesus, in prayer, restored the eternal and profound peace and reconciliation.

Why is this sacred place, the Garden of Gethsemane, so holy and memorable a place for us? Why are we so privileged to be here? The name "gethsemane" means the "olive oil press", where the olives come to their full purpose, are squeezed so as to give up their liquid, that would produce the intended healing and nourishment. Yes, the olives undergo pain and suffering for the sake of the Kingdom, and our faith is tested, like Jesus in the garden, as He shed drops of blood, as He offers Himself totally to the Father in Heaven. We are here, keeping Him company in His agony, but also that Jesus Himself may encourage us to persevere in our resolve for prayer for peace in Jerusalem, and peace in the world.

Gethsemane is the Mount of Olives, a preferred place for Jesus in gathering His disciples and apostles. In Luke chapter 19, verse 28 and following, the Mount of Olives begins the triumphant entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. It begins here, on Mount Olivet.

The Mount of Olives is the garden where Jesus undergoes His agony and His arrest, as Mathew (26:30 and following) describes.

The Mount of Olives, according to the Acts of the Apostles, is where Jesus ascended into Heaven (Acts 1:12).

And the Mount of Olives is the scene of the eschatological discourse of the Gospel of St. Mark (13:3), such as the destruction of Jerusalem, the signs of the Last Day, Jerusalem's impending destruction, and the need for watchfulness.

This Mount Olivet is quite significant for us pilgrims, pilgrims of prayer to the Father in Heaven. From this very place, the prayer of Jesus, accompanied with sweat of blood, pierced the Heavens and achieved the Peace of Humanity, and restored the new order of grace, wondrously better than the Garden of Eden.

With this visit to Mount Olivet, we are indeed achieving our good to pray for peace, and pray for all those who suffer in this conflict. And, at least, we know the secret on how to storm Heaven with our prayer, especially through this Eucharist.

Let us make a deeper commitment (if this is possible) to the purpose of our pilgrimage of prayer for the peace of Jerusalem and the entire world. We deepen our resolve to prayer as the means to bring about a reversal of the damage done by sin in the Garden of Eden, and now through the Cross, Death, and Resurrection here in the New Garden of Gethsemane, where Evil has been forever conquered, we may become the messengers of the new order of grace, peace, and reconciliation in the world.

And, of course, wherever we go in our preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as bishops and descendants of the apostles, who were here in this garden, wherever we celebrate the Eucharist, we will be bringing this peace to all. And we will not cease in this great mission of reconciliation and peace in the human family. "Who would have believed what we have heard", says the prophet Isaiah (53:1-7), and who would have believed that we are here at Gethsemane?

This reading from Isaiah is taken from the "Suffering and Triumph of the Servant of the Lord." And we are given an opportunity to read and contemplate for ourselves, how the Lamb of God takes upon Him all of our guilt, and did not open His mouth, but was silent before us.

The prophet Isaiah invites us to consider how the Lamb of God is oppressed, and condemned, and taken away. He was sent off from the land of the living, and buried among the wicked, "though he had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood (v. 9). And verse 10 says: "But the Lord was pleased to crush Him in infirmity". Yet, this chapter (53), describing the sufferings of the servant, the Lamb of God, is full of hope: "Because of his affliction, he shall be the light in fullness of days; through his sufferings, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear" (v. 11).

The Church deeply understands this mystery of death on the cross, and invites us to pray with her, with psalm 71: "In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame." It is a prayer worth repeating with Mother Church.

In our second reading, St. Paul brings to mind how Jesus prayed, and we know that Jesus prayed at this Garden of Gethsemane. We can easily imagine Jesus fully prostrated on this holy monument, where drops of blood make this monument an altar of God, uttering his "priestly prayers" and truly being heard, piercing the Heavens.

St. Paul says it this way: "For Jesus, in the days of his earthly life, with a loud cry and tears, offered up prayers and supplications to him who was able to save him from death, and was heard because of his reverent submission."

The Church, as the Bride of Christ, in her ceaseless prayers, knows how to pray daily. I found this psalm-prayer during the Christmas season, and would like us to pray it now, as well:

“God our Father, glorious in giving life, and more glorious in restoring it, when his last night on earth came, your son shed tears of blood, but dawn brought incomparable gladness. Do not turn away from us, or we shall fall back to dust, but rather turn our mourning into joy by raising us up with Christ.”

Finally, the proclamation of the Gospel of the Agony in the Garden, according to St. Matthew (26:36-46), and our hearing it proclaimed—purifies His Church, in the very place where it took place, and the purification goes deeper into our hearts.

Jesus said to His disciples, “Sit down here, while I go yonder and pray.” We have made a long journey to sit down here and pray, and celebrate this Eucharist. We are aware that discipleship and apostleship are the most intimate ways of accompanying Jesus. This Eucharist will empower us to accomplish the reversal of the Garden of Eden with the Garden of Gethsemane—through the cross and resurrection.

This same Eucharist will empower us to persevere in this resolve to pray for peace in Jerusalem and peace in the world. Let us continue with this Eucharist; let us be obedient to the words of the Lord Jesus who told His disciples: “Sit down here, while I go over yonder and pray.” And His prayer is our prayer, for it is the prayer of the Church.

+Placido Rodriguez