

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FEAST OF SAINT MATTHIAS, TUESDAY, MAY 14, 2019
ON THE OCCASION OF THE GRADUATION OF STUDENTS FROM THE PONTIFICAL JOHN PAUL II INSTITUTE FOR
STUDIES ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE
SAINT JOHN PAUL II NATIONAL SHRINE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, I greet you in the name of the Holy Father and express His Holiness' closeness and heartfelt congratulations as you prepare for your graduation ceremonies. I greet Father Antonio Lopez, Dr. Anderson, and the Faculty and Staff of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family Life. I thank you for your dedication to your students in preparing them to proclaim the Gospel of the Family. I thank our graduates for your deep commitment to your studies and to accompanying married couples and families to give ever-greater witness to the beauty of authentic love.

As one phase of your journey draws to a close, something new prepared by Divine Providence will appear. Today is a day to celebrate new beginnings. It is the Feast of Saint Matthias, who helped to reconstitute the Twelve. The phase of the Apostles' journey which had ended was tragic. They had left everything to follow Jesus, but then one of their own, Judas, betrayed the Lord, who subsequently underwent His Passion. The horror of the betrayal and the Crucifixion left a deep impression on the Apostles, even after they received great consolation from the Risen Lord.

In today's First Reading, the Apostles are gathered, with Peter as their leader. Saint Luke tells us: *Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers (adelphoi)*. As a nuncio, this little detail is important. It reminds us of the need for communion with the See of Peter, who was given a special place and authority by Christ Himself. Peter speaks with authority to the *adelphoi* – the brothers, the brothers and sisters, the disciples – those not joined by blood but by spiritual kinship and bonds of love in the Risen Lord. Peter speaks as a leader, and the early Church serves as a model for the Church of later ages, because the Church listens. Those gathered together not only listen to Peter, but later, they will listen to the Spirit of God when they pray for guidance, leading to the selection Matthias.

Peter speaks. He says that it is necessary to choose one of the men who accompanied the rest of them the whole time Jesus was among them, from the time of His baptism in the Jordan to His Ascension – to become a witness to the Resurrection. But *why* was it necessary to reconstitute the Twelve? It was not simply to erase the memory of what Judas had done; it was also in preparation for the mission they would have to proclaim the Gospel, beginning with the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Despite what had happened, God still addresses the message of salvation to the children of Abraham. The mission goes on. An important message is that even when one of our members betrays the Lord, God can still bring good out of it.

In the election of Matthias, we can discover something of our own mission, as Pope Benedict XVI taught us:

“While there is no lack of unworthy and traitorous Christians in the Church, it is up to each of us to counterbalance the evil done by them with our clear witness to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.” (Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 18 October 2006)

Just as Peter prepared the others for their mission, so too the faculty of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute has been preparing you for your mission to be a force for the good in the world through the proclamation of Gospel. Pope Francis says:

“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew.” (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 1)

The Holy Father dreams of a missionary Church. Like the Apostles, the first mission is to our own families. We know how the family is under assault by moral relativism and gender ideology. It is our collective task to make the Presence of Christ, from whom joy is constant born anew, known there. The Presence of Christ, whom we encounter personally in prayer, scripture, and in the sacraments, is found within the Church, even a Church of sinners. To proclaim to others - couples preparing for marriage, those struggling in their marriages, and especially to the young - that there is hope in Christ is to say, “I am convinced that this same hope is present in His Church.”

The faith which we and our graduates profess is sustained and lived in community. The graduates of your institute, as men and women of the Church, will give witness to their faith in parishes, neighborhoods, and in families. In contrast to the individualism that dominates American culture, they will witness to the value of community, family, and the common good.

There is, of course, a temptation to “play it safe” and speak only with those with whom we agree. Another temptation is to look back only to the days when Pope John Paul II was articulating his Theology of the Body. But Saint John Paul II, like Pope Benedict XVI, and now Pope Francis, who, like Saint Matthias, was elected to take his place, would want a Church that is missionary – that concretely proposes Christ again and again as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

This proposing of Christ sometimes takes the form of teaching. Other times, it takes the form of accompanying others and loving them, even amid their struggles, demonstrating the patient endurance characteristic of believers. For we who know Christ have been wounded by the beauty of His love, and Christ has become our everything – affecting our whole life and all our relationships.

It is this same love which we hope to share with those to whom we minister. This is our mission, and it demands sacrifice. It is interesting to read the “Instruction before Marriage” that was used in this country prior to the Second Vatican Council, because it captures this sense of sacrifice:

“And whatever sacrifices you may hereafter be required to make to preserve this common life, always make them generously. Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it easy; and perfect love can make it a joy. We are willing to give in proportion as we love. And when love is perfect, the sacrifice is complete. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son; and the Son so loved us that He gave Himself for our salvation. *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*”

This beautiful passage reminds us, not only of the sacrificial love of marriage, but also how much God loves us. It is the faith in *this* God who loves in *this* way that we must share with others. Faith offers the promise of new life and a humanity changed by love. Our graduates can make the Church a place of a different or transformed humanity, governed by the supreme law of love. Charity does not seek its own interests but seeks the good of others. Recognizing others, even those who fail to live the Church's teaching, not as a threat but as a brother or sister with whom we walk and seeing them not as a burden but as those whom we would happily accompany in time of need is a sign of this changed humanity, a better humanity for knowing Christ.

This change in ourselves and in the Church cannot come about by our willing it, nor by some Pelagian efforts; rather, it comes from outside us – from a radical “Other” - the Risen Lord. He works in the hearts of believers. Thus, the Christianity which our new graduates will propose is a way of life and a changed humanity, diametrically opposed to the type of moralism, which seeks to control behavior or reduces life to the keeping of rules. One can follow the rules without being transformed by the love of Christ, whose pastoral charity knows no bounds.

Our future graduates have spent time in study not to retreat from the world but to engage it. This is the reason the Faculty of the Institute have labored so hard, so that the world and culture may be evangelized. There are those who would like to change the world, and even the person, through political and ideological means, but Christ and His Gospel, the Gospel of the Family and of Life, allow us to face the world, marriage and family life, with all its problems, in a new way. The Gospel gives us vision.

The example of the Apostles, gathered in prayer before electing Matthias, reminds us of the need to see things the way God sees them. Matthias' election was not a democratic one where everyone votes; rather, in the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke wants to make it clear that the election of Matthias was God's choice. He took his place among the Twelve so that the Apostolic College could carry out its mission: *diakonia kai apostole* - the ministry and the apostolate.

God is calling you now to assist the Successor of Saint Peter and the successors of the Apostles in our collective mission: to bear witness, wherever He sends you, to the power of the Risen Lord and to bear fruit, especially by keeping a simple commandment: *love one another*.