

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FEAST OF SAINT JAMES THE APOSTLE
20TH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE AFRICAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC CLERGY AND RELIGIOUS IN THE UNITED STATES (ACCCRUS)
ATLANTA, GEORGIA, JULY 25, 2019

Your Excellencies, Reverend Fathers, Beloved Religious, Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, I want to express to you the spiritual closeness of the Holy Father and to assure you of the prayers of Pope Francis. The Holy Father wants a missionary church, and you have left your homelands to bring the joy of the Gospel to the people of this country. I too am pleased to be with you as we give thanks to God for the contributions of African Catholic Clergy and Religious to the life of the Church in the United States.

It is fitting that we do so on the Feast of an Apostle, in this case, the Apostle James. An Apostle is one who is sent. He is one sent by the Lord to preach and teach, cast out demons and heal the sick in the Name of the Lord Jesus and with his authority. He is one who is sent to proclaim the kingdom of God and who, filled with the Holy Spirit of God, does so fearlessly and tirelessly. He is one who is sent to bring glad tidings to the poor and to proclaim liberty to captives. He does not go wherever he wants or perform mighty deeds on his own; rather, He is one sent by God with a specific mission – to bring the joy of the Gospel to others.

God called Saint James. He, with his brother John, was a fisherman. His father Zebedee was a fisherman. He may have only ever envisioned himself as a fisherman, but then he heard the call of Jesus, “Follow me.” He left his father and the fishermen’s nets and followed, not knowing what lay ahead. He was to begin a great adventure. Who of us could honestly say that as a child we imagined being missionaries in America? Sure enough, the God of surprises called and sent us here.

While there is a tendency of those in the West to see Africa as a continent afflicted with poverty, war, corruption and disease, the same people fail to see the richness of Africa – in its cultures, its values, especially the value of human life and family, and in its religiosity. While faith is on the wane here and in Europe, God is calling more and more on the African continent to baptism and to the Catholic faith. Through the Spirit, the Church there is growing, and with enthusiasm, many are responding to God’s call to dedicate themselves as priests, religious, and catechists to the mission of evangelization. Those lands which once benefited from foreign missionaries are now returning the gift of faith, sending missionaries to previously Catholic and Christian countries, bringing with them the life-giving Word and saving sacraments to others. The Spirit blows where He wills, and He has led you here.

It is true that life in Africa is not always easy. It is also part of the sad story of this country that many Africans were brought here against their will, trafficked and sold as slaves, forced to submit to chains and the lash, treated as property rather than as men and women. That is part of the story, but another dimension of the story is this: that in spite of many obstacles, the African people and their descendants have persevered in faith so as to make a gift of themselves to others.

They – you- have embodied the words of Saint Paul: *We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not*

destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body.

It is one thing to lament the sorrows of the past and the present – to carry about in the body the dying of Jesus. This is not the whole story. The life of Jesus is also manifested in our bodies. The life of Jesus, and with it, the promise of joy and everlasting life, must also be manifested in us. God has raised you up to be priests and religious to manifest His life to the people in this country! What a privilege!

It is useful to reflect on Saint James to appreciate this privilege. He is called Saint James the Greater, because He, with Peter and John, were privileged to witness certain events in the life of Jesus, including the Transfiguration of the Lord on Mount Tabor and Jesus' Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

When he first heard Jesus' call to follow him, James must have already sensed in Jesus' voice a remarkable Presence. His encounter with Jesus changed him so much that he left everything to follow. He also witnessed Jesus' power in performing healing miracles and casting out demons. The authority with which Jesus taught must have pierced him to the heart. He grew to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

But like the people of his day, he may have presumed that this Messiah would come in power to throw off the shackles of Roman oppression. If he stuck to Jesus, he might too have a share in his new reign and find a good position of himself. Humanly-speaking, ambition, the desire for wealth and power, for position and privilege began to creep in. James' mother too wanted him to do well and wanted a position for her sons at Jesus' right and left.

We too may have had a similar experience. Many people were probably proud of us for choosing this path of life, for receiving our education and formation, even for coming to the United States. Too often priesthood and consecrated life are seen as a means for "advancement." Like St. James, who witnessed the Transfiguration, we can see the glory, but we can also misinterpret what truly glory involves.

But Jesus, just as he did with James, helps us to see things more clearly, *"You know how the leaders of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority felt. **But it shall not be so among you.** Rather, whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."*

We have been called and given the gift of our vocations. We have been given authority to preach, to teach, and to govern. But, the authority and power we have is His, not ours. The authority and power from on High are meant for service. Look to the example of Jesus, who, at the Last Supper, washed His disciples' feet.

It is true that James glimpsed the glory of God at the Transfiguration, but perhaps, he was educated by Jesus, not only at the Last Supper but also at another privileged moment – at Gethsemane. Already the Savior's soul had become sorrowful unto death, knowing the chalice that He would drink, anticipating the impact of the weight of the sin of the world. He wept and sweat blood, so great was His suffering. This was but the prelude to what awaited Him at Calvary.

At Calvary, we see not only the death of Jesus but the life-giving power of His love. If we want to aspire to true glory, then let us aspire to the glory of the Cross – offering ourselves for our flocks. This may involve suffering and dying to ourselves and our own aspirations, but we should be encouraged by the

words of Saint Paul: *For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.*

As missionaries, we give witness not only to the death of Jesus but to His life. God has called you. He has given you many gifts for the service of His people. He asks that you help build up the Church here by sharing the gifts, especially the gift of faith. In reflecting on these gifts, I place before you once more the words of Saint Paul: *Everything indeed is for you, so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God.*

Let us ask Saint James to assist us with his prayers, so that we may hand on the gift of faith for the praise and glory of Almighty God!