

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
VIGIL OF THE 4TH SUNDAY OF LENT, MARCH 10, 2018
CONCLUSION OF “24 HOURS FOR THE LORD”
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, DC

Once again, we gather to worship and adore our Eucharistic Lord, concluding this year's 40 Hours Devotion here at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. In his Lenten message this year, the Holy Father expressed his hope that this time of reconciliation and Eucharistic adoration would be a “moment of grace.” As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to the United States, I express His Holiness' spiritual closeness and paternal affection to all gathered here and to those listening on television and radio, courtesy of the Eternal Word Television Network.

Today, we are celebrating the Vigil Mass for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, known as *Laetare Sunday*. We have reason to rejoice as the celebration of Easter draws near; there is a foretaste in the liturgy of the encounter with the Risen Lord! We have reason to rejoice, for even though we have sinned, *God is rich in mercy*. Despite our unworthiness, God is relentless in pursuing us with his tenderness and love so that we may know the joy of belonging to Him.

In the first reading from Chronicles, we heard how the people were unfaithful to God; how they worshiped false gods and built temples to them; and, how they rejected the words of the prophets. Finally, their actions had real consequences: the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the survivors. The Holy Father's Lenten message was entitled, “*Because of the increase of iniquity, the love of many will grow cold.*” (Mt 24:12). Indeed, many of God's people did not heed his voice or listen to the prophets' call to repentance, allowing their hearts to grow cold toward the Lord and the covenant.

The Holy Father laments those who, in our times, “appear as ‘snake charmers’, who manipulate human emotions in order to enslave others” and lead them astray. He warns of “charlatans, who offer easy and immediate solutions to suffering that soon prove utterly useless” and decries, “How many young people are taken in by the panacea of drugs, of disposable relationships, of easy but dishonest gains!” (cf. Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2018, 1 November 2017) How many today live in a type of exile, far from God!

Despite the tragedy of exile, the author of Chronicles offers hope: God's plan involves mercy! God wanted the destruction of the Temple and the exile in Babylon to move the hearts of his people to true repentance and to turn back to Him! He shows that He is the Lord of Mercy – “*the Lord, the God of heaven*” – when he moves the heart of King Cyrus, a pagan, to allow for the rebuilding of the Temple so that the People of God may be with Him – encounter Him anew. In the end, the mercy and love of God triumph! Sin and destruction do not have the last word.

What was illustrated in the Old Testament, Saint Paul tells us happened in a deeper way in the fullness of time, writing: “*God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions brought us to life in Christ.*” He did this to show us *the immeasurable riches of his grace in his*

kindness to us in Christ. Saint Paul continues that it was not through our merits that we have been raised up; rather, *it is by grace through faith* that we have been saved. This grace is a *gift of God.*

God's gift of Himself to us reaches its high point in the sacrifice of His Son, the sacrifice of Calvary. During Lent, we look to the Body of the Crucified One to see both the glory and the humble, tenderness of our God. The glory of the Lord shines in the total giving of Himself to us – on the Cross and as Food in the Holy Eucharist. It is the glory of the Cross, with which we were marked in baptism, to which we must all give witness!

In the Gospel, Jesus told Nicodemus: *"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."* This is our joy: that we are so loved by God that He not only created us but that He also redeemed us through the offering of His own beloved Son! Yes, *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but may have eternal life.* Here we see that the plan of God involves mercy, not abandoning us to destruction, but drawing us to Himself to have eternal life.

How many times at sporting events, one sees signs that say, "John 3:16"! For us as Christians, our sign is the sign of the Cross. At the cross we discover the sign of the Divine Mercy and gaze upon the glory of the Lord. The Eucharistic Presence of the Lord is a reminder of God's permanent and relentless love – of the new and eternal covenant. Saint Francis de Sales says that, "In no other action can the Savior be considered more tender or more loving than in this one, where he annihilates himself, so to say, and reduces himself to food, in order to penetrate our souls and to unite himself to the hearts of his faithful."

We have reason to rejoice: our God loves us with great tenderness and mercy, despite our weakness. He lifts us up, brings us back from the exile of sin, and restores us life. Our faith then is to be lived in light of this mystery; it is an encounter with and an experience of this God that transforms us. God's whole way of living and existing is one of love. The worship and the reception of Holy Communion, as we become one with Him, ought to transform our way of living so that we become missionaries of God's love.

How many people, having been deceived by the Father of Lies and the snake charmers and charlatans of our world are looking for and longing for God's love? How many are like Nicodemus, having a desire for God but who are paralyzed, unable to make the leap of faith, because of what others will think? The Holy Father recalls Dante's image of the devil as "seated on a throne of ice, in frozen and loveless isolation." How our world needs you to melt the coldest hearts with the love of Jesus Christ – the fire that never dies!