

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
FOCUS STUDENT LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
7TH DAY IN THE OCTAVE OF CHRISTMAS, DECEMBER 31, 2019
PHOENIX CONVENTION CENTER, PHOENIX ARIZONA

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the personal representative of the Holy Father to the United States, I greet you in the name of Pope Francis, assuring you of his prayers, paternal affection and his closeness as you gather. The Holy Father has called young people the “now of God”, and he certainly means it! I too offer you my greetings during this joyful Christmas season as today we are celebrating the 7th Day in the Octave of Christmas. I thank Father John Lager for his kind invitation to join you.

As the year draws to a close we pause to thank God for His many blessings throughout the year. While it is true, there have been dark times for the Church during the course of the year, we must not let these obscure the many moments of grace that God has bestowed upon us. The very fact that you are here is a sign of God’s grace, not only at the end of the year, but at the dawn of a new one.

At Christmas, we hear St. Paul’s letter to Titus in which he writes that “*the kindness and generous love of God our Savior appeared.*” It is this Mystery that we celebrate – God’s love appeared in the flesh. The Mystery of the Incarnation is not an event that happened only two thousand years ago as something historical, but rather, the Mystery continues to live in the lives and hearts of believers – people like you, who, as members of the Church, continue to make the reality of Christ’s Presence known in our world.

Our first reading today is taken from the first letter of St. John, which emphasizes the fact that the Word became flesh. That letter begins: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we saw it and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father ...*

Life was made manifest in Christ. It is our task to testify to it – by being witnesses. We are missionaries of this life that was made manifest to us. You are missionaries on the new frontiers of college campuses and universities and even in the realm of the virtual world. We must bring this “word of life” everywhere.

The Holy Father wants a missionary Church – a Church that goes forth. Recently, he said:

“We become missionaries by living as witnesses: bearing witness by our lives that we have come to know Jesus. It is our lives that speak... Can we who have discovered that we are children of the Father, keep silent about the joy of being loved, the certainty of being ever precious in God’s eyes? That is a message that so many people are waiting to hear.” (POPE FRANCIS, *HOMILY, VESPERS FOR THE BEGINNING OF THE MISSIONARY MONTH, 1 OCTOBER 2019*)

The context of our first reading is a warning to the early disciples. They saw the love of God. They heard that God is light and in Him there is no darkness. They were exhorted to keep the commandments, especially the commandment to love one’s brothers and sisters, for *he who loves his brother abides in the*

light and is no cause for stumbling. Nevertheless, the Apostle warned the tiny flock of the danger of worldliness. Today, the reading becomes darker with its reference to “antichrists.”

However, the Apostle reminds the disciples that they “*have the anointing that comes from the Holy One.*” In baptism, you were anointed in the name of Christ the Savior as priest, prophet, and king. Our Gospel adds that *from his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.* The Lord is still calling you by His grace to give prophetic witness. But to what or to Whom? Pope Francis responds:

“The Lord is asking you to be a gift wherever you are, and just as you are, with everyone around you. He is asking you not simply to go through life, but to give life.” (Ibid.)

You must give witness to Life, and not only to life, but also to the truth. The Apostle reminds the disciples that he is writing to them because they have knowledge of the truth. But both life and truth are not abstract ideas; rather, they are a person. Jesus Himself says, “*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.*”

In his first encyclical letter, Pope Benedict XVI wrote (and Pope Francis quotes this often):

“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (POPE BENEDICT XVI, *DEUS CARITAS EST*, 25 DECEMBER 2005, 1)

Christ founded a Church, and those first disciples followed Him. They believed and followed because of His Presence – because of an Event. His miracles and his preaching were part of this Event, but there was more. People followed and believed because of what Christ showed Himself to be – *the Way, the Truth, and the Life.* He made a proposal to them – a proposal charged with meaning: Follow me and you will see the glory of God! *And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only-begotten Son, full of grace and truth.*

His disciples later would be sent to make new disciples. This group became the Church. It was Jesus Himself who established the Church – calling and forming people to be His Church. Educated by Jesus to belong to Him, the disciples were called by Him to be united, to become missionaries, and to witness to Him. You are the members of this Church, His Church.

Your peers are looking for the fulfillment of their desires. Often, they seek them in the things of the world, but these never satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. It is your task as disciples and missionaries to show them the Way, mediating the encounter with Jesus – the Way, Truth, and Life. It is not easy, particularly as the world becomes more hostile to the life of Christian faith. Do not lose courage: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome the light.*

Today's Gospel, the Prologue to Saint John's Gospel, used to be said at the end of Mass prior to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. It was sometimes called “The Last Gospel”, even though it is the beginning of John's Gospel. It was (and is) a reminder of our need, having heard the Word, to go forth into the world to share this Word which we have received.

Listen once again to these words: *What came to be through Him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.* Christ is our Light, and He shines in the darkness, guiding our path. At the same time, we

recall His words from the Sermon on the Mount: *You are the light of the world*. The light banishes the darkness.

In the power of Christ, the true light which enlightens every man and every woman on the face of the earth, go forth to share the gift of life! Go forth to testify to the true Light of the World!