

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
VIGIL OF THE 24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
INDIAN AMERICAN CATHOLIC HERITAGE DAY
ST. THOMAS SYRO-MALABAR CATHOLIC CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to the United States, I want to express Pope Francis' spiritual closeness and paternal affection, assuring you of his prayers. It is an honor to be with you as you celebrate this Indian American Catholic Heritage Day. I greet Bishop John McIntyre, Auxiliary Bishop of Philadelphia, Bishop Jacob Angadiath of St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Diocese of Chicago, Bishop Philipose Stephanos of the Eparchy of St. Mary Queen of Peace of the United States and Canada of the Syro-Malankara Church, and Archbishop Mathew Moolakkatt of the Knanaya Catholics of Kottayam Archeparchy, as well as the clergy and religious who are present. It is beautiful to see the rich diversity in the Church by which God reveals His face as the Father of Mercy. As members of the Latin, Syro-Malabar, and Syro-Malankara Churches gather with members of the Knanaya Community to celebrate the liturgy, we are reminded of our essential unity in Christ and in the Eucharist, which is the cause and effect of our unity.

As Catholics we are united in the Lord and with the Pope, the Successor of Saint Peter, the Vicar of Christ. In today's Gospel, taken from Saint Mark, Peter's answers the question: "*But who do you say that I am?*" The people of Jesus' day appreciated Jesus as a wonder-worker and a preacher. They thought he was *John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets*. The question that Jesus poses to his disciples comes exactly in the middle of Mark's Gospel; it is the central question. Is Jesus simply a better rabbi or prophet or is He, in fact, the Savior? Simon Peter answers boldly, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

This too must be our proclamation – that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, who saves us from our sins. Jesus is, as Saint Thomas would proclaim after He touched the wounds of the Risen Lord- *My Lord and My God!* He is the One who changes our life and who gives our life direction. Pope Francis reminds us:

"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 born anew." (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 1.)

But there is always a temptation: to say that *I believe* but then to neglect one's responsibility in witnessing to that faith, whether through embracing the cross or through acts of charity. A second fundamental question that the readings pose is: *Is your faith shown in works?* For it is not enough simply to *believe* in Jesus, we must also *follow* Him as disciples.

"Following Him" means embracing our cross. When Jesus says that He must suffer and be killed, Peter wants to prevent this. Jesus rebukes him sternly, "*Get behind me, Satan!*" Peter is thinking in a worldly way – of comfort, of success, of life without sacrifice. A true disciple of Jesus must *deny himself, take up his cross, and follow*. Jesus is not just another rabbi, political leader, or philosopher; He shows us the way that leads to life. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

His way passes through the Cross. As immigrants and descendants of immigrants you know suffering and the cross. You understand what it is like to deny yourself many things to come to a new country and to leave behind family, friends, and the familiarity of home to make a new life. Arriving here in America, many of you knew hardships: loneliness, poverty, and prejudice. Great sacrifices were demanded, and yet you made them out of love for your families.

The way of the Lord Jesus, a way that involves sacrifice, is the way of love. Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it easy and perfect love can make it a joy. We are willing to sacrifice in proportion to our love, and when our love is perfect, the sacrifice is complete. Jesus, upon the Cross, makes the perfect sacrifice of love and offers Himself for you and me.

We, his disciples, witness to this love in how we treat our neighbor. If we do not have love toward our neighbor, then what type of disciple are we? St. Paul says in the Second Reading: *“What good is it, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?”*

Today, our world needs witnesses to God’s love, and the Church and many other immigrants are counting on your faithful witness and your generous love. We know how difficult it is in our day to be a person of faith and to hand on the faith and our cultural traditions, especially at a time of great secularization and cultural change. Many young people fall away from the faith. Simple appeals to authority no longer persuade them to believe. Lured by the prospect of material success and human respect, they are deceived by the Evil One to acquire that which they believe will make them happy. In the end, they are left disillusioned, because these things cannot offer what God offers: true love!

Your Indian American Catholic Association can serve as a true response to our society’s needs by teaching our young about the value of sacrifice and hard work; by encouraging pride in your cultural and religious heritage which draws others deeper into the Mystery of God’s love; and by your charity in showing that true discipleship involves attentiveness to our neighbor. In this way, you will be not only disciples, who embrace the Lord and His Cross, but also missionaries, witnesses to His love. You are missionary disciples.

The Holy Father says:

“...the position of missionary disciples is not in the center but at the periphery: they live poised towards the peripheries... including the peripheries of eternity, in the encounter with Jesus. In the preaching of the Gospel, to speak of ‘existential peripheries’ decentralizes things; as a rule, we are afraid to leave the center. The missionary disciple is someone ‘off center’: the center is Jesus Christ, who calls us and sends us forth.” (Pope Francis, Address to the Leadership of CELAM, 28 July 2013)

I conclude by reminding you that today is the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. The disciple *par excellence* is the Mother of God, who stood faithfully by the Cross of her Son, giving witness to a love stronger than death. Her Son was the center of her life – even in His death. May Our Lady accompany you in your announcement that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God!