

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
 APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
 “THE HEART OF CHRIST AND THE HEART OF THE PRIEST”
 CONVOCATION OF THE CLERGY OF ALASKA
 CATHEDRAL COMPLEX OF OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE, ANCHORAGE
 FEBRUARY 22, 2022**

My Dear Brothers in Christ,

It is good to be with you here in Alaska. I thank Archbishop Bellisario, Bishop Zielinski, and Archbishop Schwietz for their kind invitation to join you. It is good to be together as priests. The Holy Father is calling us to be a synodal church, a Church that walks together. If we as pastors are to walk with our people, then we must better understand our own identity and vocation as priests. Today, I want to reflect with you on two devotions in the Church that can help explore more deeply our vocation as priests, which is both a gift and a task. The first is devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the second is devotion to St. Joseph.

The Heart of Christ and the Heart of the Priest

What does it mean to have a priestly heart, configured to the heart of Christ? The homilies offered by the Holy Father on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the early years of his Pontificate are instructive in answering this question.

The 2013 homily of Pope Francis, given at Domus Sanctae Marthae, focused on two dimensions of love. First, love is expressed more clearly in actions than in words, and second, there is greater love in giving than receiving. God expresses his love by being close to his people, and the image of the shepherd who knows each member of the flock by name, conveys this *closeness*, but along with this closeness comes *tenderness*. The challenge, especially for the priest is to allow ourselves to be loved by God. It is what the Holy Father calls a “difficult” science, the difficult habit of letting myself be loved” by God. (HOMILY, SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART, JUNE 8, 2013).

The closeness of the priest as a shepherd who accompanies the people is a consistent theme of Pope Francis. The Pope stated:

“I repeat it often: walking with our people, sometimes in front, sometimes in the middle, and sometimes behind: in front in order to guide the community, in the middle in order to encourage and support; and at the back in order to keep it united and so that no one lags too far behind, to keep them united.” (MEETING WITH CLERGY, CONSECRATED PEOPLE, AND MEMBERS OF DIOCESAN PASTORAL COUNCILS, CATHEDRAL OF SAN RUFFINO, ASSISI, 4 OCTOBER 2013)

Five years later, again preaching at daily Mass on the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, recalling the words of the prophet Hosea, Pope Francis explained that God did not reveal His love through power but “by loving His people, teaching them to walk, taking them in His arms, caring for them,” adding:

“How does God manifest his love? With great works? No: He makes himself smaller and smaller with gestures of tenderness and goodness. He approaches His children and with his closeness He makes us understand the greatness of love.” (HOMILY, SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART, JUNE 8, 2018)

In the text of his 2014 homily, Pope Francis emphasized the need to have a *steadfast and humble* heart, focusing on the steadfastness of God's love and fidelity. God was not afraid to bind Himself to humanity; the steadfastness of God's love finds its fulfillment in Jesus, who remains faithful, showing forth the face of the Merciful Father. The Holy Father wrote:

“God's steadfast love for his people is manifest and wholly fulfilled in *Jesus Christ*, who, in order to honor God's bond with his people, he made himself our slave, stripped himself of his glory and assumed the form of a servant. Out of love he did not surrender to our ingratitude, not even in the face of rejection. ... Jesus remains faithful, he never betrays us: even when we were wrong, He always waits for us to forgive us: He is the face of the merciful Father.” (HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER, READ BY CARDINAL ANGELO SCOLA, 27 JUNE 2014)

The steadfastness of his love shows the humility of His Heart. He came to offer love with gentleness and humility, which in turn, allows the priest to be a witness to His love in humble, gentle service. The Holy Father continued:

“And the significance of the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is ... (that) God's faithfulness teaches us to accept life as a circumstance of his love and he allows us to witness this love to our brothers and sisters in *humble and gentle service*.” (IBID.)

The emerging image of the priestly heart configured to the Heart of Christ is one of fidelity, humility, closeness, and gentleness. On the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart in 2015, Pope Francis, addressing those gathered for the Worldwide Retreat for Priests, spoke again of God's closeness to us. God holds us, much like when a parent holds the hands of a child; He binds us with His love. This love binds us “but it binds in freedom; it binds while leaving you the space to respond with love.” Moreover, this closeness of God teaches priests how to “walk in the Spirit”.

This walking in the Spirit speaks to the need of the priest to be not only prophetic but also discerning. Priests must have a *discerning* heart. Addressing seminarians at the Spanish college, he said:

“At this point it is important to grow in the habit of discernment, which allows them to value every motion and moment, even that which seems in opposition and contradictory, and to sift out what comes from the Spirit, a grace that we should ask for on our knees. Only from this foundation ... will they be able to train others in that discernment that leads to Resurrection and Life.” (POPE FRANCIS, AUDIENCE WITH THE COMMUNITY OF THE PONTIFICAL SPANISH COLLEGE OF SAN JOSÉ, 1 APRIL 2017)

This spirit of discernment is essential also to synodality, because a synodal church is a church, not only that walks together, but that also listens – listens to God, listens to what the Spirit has to say to the churches, listens to the lay faithful, and listens to the voices of religious and the clergy. The pastors of the Church need to be men of prayer who can recognize the reality of their situations, interpret them in light of faith and experience, and finally, after deliberating, make a choice and accept responsibility for a decision.

Often as priests, we must discern the presence of God, even amid persecution. The Feast of the Sacred Heart in 2015 occurred around the time of the martyrdom of 23 Coptic Christians. The Holy Father reminded priests that God did not abandon these martyrs but remained in their midst. Using the image of the Good Shepherd who does not abandon the lost sheep, the Holy Father asked:

“What does Jesus say to us in Luke at Chapter 15 about that shepherd who noticed that he had 99 sheep for one was missing? He left them well safeguarded, locked away, and went to search for the other, who was ensnared in thorns.... And he didn’t beat it, didn’t scold it: he took it tightly in his arms and cared for it, for it was injured. Do you do the same with your faithful? When you realize that one of your flock is missing? Or are we accustomed to being a Church which has a single sheep in her flock and we let the other 99 get lost on the hill? Are you moved by all this compassion?” (HOMILY FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS, 12 JUNE 2015)

The heart of the priest must be both open to walking in the Spirit and full of compassion. In 2016, the Jubilee for Priests during the Year of Mercy coincided with the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart. The Holy Father examined the Merciful Heart of Christ, which welcomes and understands sinners, renewing the memory of the call and the first love of the priest. The love of the Sacred Heart is persevering and relentless, going out to those most distant – to the peripheries. Already in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis had written:

“Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 20)

Here in Alaska, we are not merely at the spiritual and existential peripheries, but we are even at the geographic peripheries. The long distances, the harsh winters, the lack, at times, of priestly fraternity, can tempt us to despair or even simply to stay in our own little world, our comfortable world. But is that what Christ called us to? To a life of comfort? Of course not! Our people need shepherds whose hearts, like the Lord’s are relentless in showing mercy and compassion. Priests must have *compassionate* hearts.

Pope Francis invited priests to contemplate the Heart of Christ and posed a fundamental question:

Contemplating the Heart of Christ, we are faced with the fundamental question of our priestly life: *Where is my heart directed?* It is a question we need to keep asking, daily, weekly... *Where is my heart directed?* Our ministry is often full of plans, projects and activities: from catechesis to liturgy, to works of charity, to pastoral and administrative commitments. Amid all these, we must still ask ourselves: What is my heart set on? (HOMILY, SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART, JUBILEE FOR PRIESTS, 3 JUNE 2016)

During the time of the pandemic, many priests around the world found themselves in difficulty, not merely because of the physical threat that the virus posed, but because their identity was thoroughly entwined with their own plans and projects; then, much of this was forced to stop. The lay faithful struggled mightily with the same issue, understanding themselves according to their job or function only. When work or constant activity disappeared and the projects collapsed, what remained?

What remains when we have been stripped of everything? In contemplating the treasures of the Sacred Heart, the Holy Father stated that the two greatest riches were His Heavenly Father and us. It is a reminder for the priest to encounter the Father in prayer and to be “open and available to others,” no longer looking to himself.

Two years earlier, Pope Francis had said that prayer was essential to priestly life if one was to be available to others:

“A priest who does not pray has closed the door, has closed the path of creativity. It is precisely in prayer, when the Spirit makes you feel something, the devil comes and makes you feel another, but prayer is the condition for moving forward. ... Prayer is the first step, because one must open oneself to the Lord to be able to open to others.” (MEETING WITH THE PRIESTS OF THE DIOCESE OF CASERTA, JULY 26, 2014)

This availability to others characterizes the priestly heart of Jesus. In that same homily, the Holy Father said that the priest is one who seeks out the lost, who includes others, and who is filled with joy.

For a priest to say that he is available is to say that his priestly heart, modeled after that of Jesus, is a *free* heart. A priestly heart is free to set aside its own concerns in favor of the flock, including the lost members. He said:

“Such is a heart that seeks out. A heart that does not set aside times and spaces as private. Woe to those shepherds to privatize their ministry! It is not jealous of its legitimate quiet time, even that, and never demands that it be left alone. A shepherd after the heart of God does not protect his own comfort zone. He is not worried about protecting his good name, but will be slandered as Jesus was. Unafraid of criticism, he is disposed to take risks in seeking to imitate his Lord.” (HOMILY, SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART, JUBILEE FOR PRIESTS, 3 JUNE 2016)

The priestly heart is inclusive in the sense that it seeks out the lost and is missionary, recognizing that the priestly anointing received is for the people:

He (the priest of Christ) is anointed for his people, not to choose his own projects but to be close to the real men and women whom God has entrusted to him. No one is excluded from his heart, his prayers or his smile. With a father’s loving gaze and heart, he welcomes and includes everyone, and if at times he has to correct, it is to draw people closer. He stands apart from no one, but is always ready to dirty his hands.” (IBID.)

In concluding, Pope Francis said that the heart of the priest must be filled with a joy born of forgiveness, a joy of a heart changed by mercy. Indeed, the heart of the priest, like the Heart of Christ, must be a large one, filled with missionary zeal, compassion, and joy.

In his 2017 homily for the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, the Holy Father selected two words to celebrate the feast: to *choose* and *littleness*. He reminds priests that it was not they who chose God; rather, it was God who chose them. The true generosity is God’s. He pointed out that Moses reminded the people, after entering a covenant with God, that it was the Lord who bound Himself to the people. God chooses. The Holy Father reminds us that “We are chosen for love, and this is our identity.” (HOMILY, SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS, 23 JUNE 2017)

The vocation of the priest, rooted in the call to love, shows its true strength in that God chose us because of our smallness, not our might. Some might object, asking, “Does not God call the great ones of the earth too?” The Holy Father answered the objection, responding: “His Heart is open, but the great

ones are not able to hear his voice because they are full of themselves. To hear the voice of the Lord, you have to make yourself little.” (IBID.)

Many of you are familiar with the story, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, by Dr. Seuss. The Grinch wanted to steal all the Christmas presents and rob everyone of joy. He had a very small heart, but by the end of the story his heart was enlarged: “*And what happened, then? Well, in Whoville they say – that the Grinch’s small heart grew three sizes that day. And then – the true meaning of Christmas came through, and the Grinch found the strength of ten Grinches, plus two!*”

This illustrates the transformative power of love, but there we are speaking of fiction. God’s love is both transformative and real, helping us to overcome our selfishness. The Holy Father suggests that the priestly heart is not self-referential; rather, through formation, the heart of the individual comes to encounter a central mystery of faith in the Heart of Christ:

“The heart of Christ, the pierced heart of Christ, the heart of Revelation, the heart of our faith – because He made Himself small, He chose this path. Paul uses some of these expressions: He abased Himself; humbled Himself; emptied himself unto death, death on a cross.” (IBID.)

Christ makes a “choice for littleness, so that the glory of God might be manifest.” The Pope concluded by saying that the problem of the faith is the “core of our life”; that is, one can be virtuous but have little or no faith. Thus, the starting point for the disciple (and the priest who is always a disciple) is the mystery of Jesus who saved us with His faithfulness.

To summarize, a priestly heart, modeled after the heart of Christ, should be one that conveys the closeness and tenderness of God. It is a heart that is faithful in its steadfast love – a heart bound in love to the Father and to the flock. A priestly heart is discerning and compassionate, a compassion learned from meditation and prayerful consideration of God’s abundant love for us. A heart, formed after the Heart of Christ, is also available and free; as such, the priest will have a missionary heart that seeks out the lost and joyfully draw others, humbly and gently, to the merciful love of God.

The priest of today must be humble enough to receive love from God, who chose and called him, so that, recognizing his own littleness, he may share the love he has received, relying not on his own littleness but on the greatness of God’s love and power at work within him.

An Illustration of the Priestly Heart: the Example of the Shreveport Martyrs

In one of my early years as Apostolic Nuncio, I remember having to travel from Louisiana to Alaska. It was a long flight. More shocking than the length of the flight was the difference in the temperature – more than 60 degrees! But now, I would like to illustrate concretely what a priestly heart, shaped after the Heart of the Christ, might look like.

I am from Brittany, and St. Jeanne Jugan, the foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor, is from my home parish. Many of the early-French speaking bishops and priests who served as missionaries in the United States were from Brittany.

Just before Christmas, a new book was published, entitled the *Shreveport Martyrs of 1873: The Surest Path to Heaven*. It recalls the yellow fever epidemic of 1873 (August- November), which devastated

Shreveport, wiping out one-fourth of the population. The *Daily Shreveport Times* stated: “Whole families were swept away, and commercial firms, partners and clerks, were literally blotted out of existence.”

In four months, five heroic priests from Brittany literally gave their lives for the Catholic faithful so that in the midst of death, the People of God would not be without the sacraments. Last summer, I went to Louisiana for the 150th anniversary of the dedication of the church where one of these “martyrs” had served and was able to pray at the tombs of these priests. The story of the Shreveport Martyrs is not yet well-known, and they have not yet been beatified formally, but maybe these missionary priests are models of sanctity for us as we struggle through this pandemic and its after-effects.

At that time, Shreveport was part of the Diocese of Natchitoches. Priests from Brittany attended to the French settlers of Louisiana and continued their ministry there after the American Civil War. First, we can appreciate their missionary spirit and their willingness to leave the familiar environs of France to go to the unknown territories of the New World.

When the epidemic began, two priests, a pastor, Father Jean Pierre, and his assistant, Father Isidore Quémerais, were attending to the sacramental needs of the people, and working with the town physicians tried to mount a response to the epidemic. Here we see that the priests did not try to do everything on their own. They were significant figures in their community, with considerable influence, yet they collaborated with the lay faithful, especially civil officials and physicians, and with women religious.

Unfortunately, the assistant priest, Father Quémerais, became ill. Father Pierre continued his ministry heroically but sensing illness and not wanting the people to be without the sacraments, sent a telegram to Alexandria requesting another priest. Father Jean Marie Biler was sent. Upon his arrival, he remarked, “My God, I have entered the city of the dead.” Father Biler brought the last sacraments to Father Quémerais and Father Pierre, the two succumbing to the fever, one right after the other.

The example of these two priests was to not abandon their flock during a time of trial. Rather than be protective of themselves, they made themselves available to the flock and generously offered their very lives in service of the flock. They remained close to the people rather than barricade themselves to protect their own lives. It was not that they were rash; on the contrary, there was an urgency to the love they had for their flock.

Father Biler administered the sacraments, drawing strength from the Blessed Sacrament, but he then began to weaken. Mother Mary Hyacinth, a French nun, sent a telegram to Bishop Auguste Marie Martin requesting that another priest be sent to Shreveport. The telegram was received by Father Louis Gergaud in Monroe, Louisiana, who told the people there to let the bishop know “that I go to my death.”

With apostolic boldness, he set off for Louisiana to attend to Father Biler and the people of the city, where the stench of death was everywhere. Father Gergaud had a strong sense of duty. Despite numerous temptations to turn back, he went forth to serve and comfort the sick and to rob death of its terror, just as Christ had done.

Father Gergaud was surprised at how many lay volunteers were attending to the sick. One woman, recognizing him as a priest, brought him to Father Biler, who was in slightly better condition than Father Gergaud had imagined. They were able to talk about spiritual things and even their hopes and dreams of missionary work. How different this atmosphere of death was from their great aspirations!

Here we pause to contemplate our own call. We had our dreams and aspirations as to how we might live our priestly vocations. No matter how noble our intentions and plans, it is good to reflect on the “littleness” of them in light of God’s larger plan for our vocations. We cannot have our vocation on our own terms. They must be lived on God’s terms. That is what these priests demonstrated in the flesh.

Although Father Biler survived a little while longer, at the time of his death, he was hardly recognizable. Father Gergaud labored on behalf of the people of Shreveport, ministering to the sick and dying so that the people would not be without the sacraments, but then he also contracted Yellow Fever.

Father François LeVézouët then volunteered to go, saying this was “the surest and shortest path to heaven”. He left for Shreveport and made sure that Father Gergaud had the last sacraments, subsequently providing the sacraments to the people there. Finally, he contracted Yellow Fever and telegraphed the Archbishop of New Orleans, requesting that two priests. A Jesuit priest and an assistant were sent. They attended to Father LeVézouët, who died on October 8, 1873.

Upon learning of these events, Bishop Martin wrote:

“The hand of God has struck me and with these priests, pride of the priesthood, the crown of my old age has fallen. Inscrutable, truly, are the ways of the Lord. I adore them and I accept them with my whole soul, and I can only say, ‘Happy is the diocese that could lose such men, happy is the earth watered by their sweat and sanctified by their death. Martyrs to charity or martyrs to persecution, in their venerated tombs will grow the deepest roots of the Holy Church of the One whose death was our life.’”

Eventually, the epidemic subsided, but, throughout it all, the People of God were never deprived of the sacraments. Christ the Priest was always among them. During this pandemic, may we draw inspiration from the courageous and heroic charity of these missionary priests. They help us to rediscover our own missionary impulse, which is rooted in the Heart of Jesus, which is relentless. While their witness teaches us that God does not abandon us, it also forces us to answer a critical question as priests: Would I have responded to such a crisis with the same spirit of dedication and generosity?

The Heart of Christ: Memory, Passion, and Consolation

Living our priestly vocation with the dedication with which Christ lived His priestly ministry on earth can be demanding. Last November, the Holy Father addressed Catholic physicians and the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery at the Catholic University of Sacred Heart, who, during the heart of the pandemic, were beginning to feel a bit worn down. He invited them to contemplate once more the Heart of Christ, using three words, which can also be useful for the renewal of our own vocation: memory, passion, and consolation.

Memory: To remember means to return *to* the heart or to return *with* the heart. But to what? Pope Francis answers this way:

“To what He did for us: the Heart of Christ shows us Jesus who offers Himself; it is the compendium of His mercy... It comes naturally to us to remember his goodness, which is freely given, which can neither be bought nor sold; and, unconditional, it does not depend on our actions.” (HOMILY ON THE OCCASION OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INAUGURATION OF THE

FACULTY OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY AT THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF THE SACRED HEART, NOVEMBER 5, 2021)

Frequently, for a renewal of our own personal zeal for our vocation and for our people, we need to return to Christ Himself to understand that He gives Himself to us freely and unconditionally. Without this constant remembrance of His Presence, amid the “haste of a thousand errands and continuous worries”, we will run dry, or as the Holy Father puts it, “Without memory, one loses one’s roots, and without roots, one does not grow.”

I think it is always good to contemplate the love Christ had for us and our families on our ordination day. I think it is also useful to remember those people – our parents, our parish priests or professors, or parishioners – who touched our hearts and who brought Christ to us. The Holy Father speaks of a need to “cultivate among ourselves *the art of remembering*, of treasuring the faces we meet. It is easy to remember the criticisms we receive, but do we remember, with gratitude, those who have touched our lives? Do we also have an appreciation for the gratitude of those whose lives we have touched through our priestly ministry? Do we give thanks to God for those privileged moments?

Passion. The second word proposed by the Holy Father is passion. To have passion is not merely a warm, affective feeling; rather in contemplating the Heart of Christ, Pope Francis reminds us that it is a “heart wounded with love, torn open for us on the cross... Pierced, He gives; in death, He gives us life... it shows us how much suffering our salvation cost” (IBID.)

The Pierced Heart of Christ reveals what God the Father is passionate about: us. We began by speaking about the closeness, tenderness and compassion needed in the priest, and it is needed precisely because this is the style of God. As priests, we are called to love God, and, in fact, our promise of celibacy is made not only to make us radically available to love but also to witness to the coming of the Kingdom and that God is to be loved above all else.

The compassionate style of God, according to the Holy Father, suggests that:

“If we really want to love God, we must be passionate about humanity, about all humanity, especially those who live in the condition in which the Heart of Jesus was manifested, that is, pain, abandonment and rejection, especially in this throwaway culture that we live in today.” (IBID.)

Comfort. The third word is comfort. Here in Alaska, you realize that life is anything but comfortable. In fact, we might say things are quite rugged. By comfort, the Holy Father really means consolation. Consolation, he says, “indicates a strength that does not come from us, but from those who are with us: that is where strength comes from.”

Do you draw your strength from Jesus, who is God-with-us? Jesus, before He sent His disciples forth to proclaim repentance and to cast out demons and to heal the sick, first summoned His disciples to be with Him. The Beloved Disciple was privileged to lean on Jesus’ breast, close to His Sacred Heart, at the Last Supper. Amid the pandemic, amid the anxieties of life, amid personal doubts, even about our vocation, do we lean on Him?

While it is true that we are called to console our people and even to console the Heart of Jesus for offenses against Him, do we allow ourselves, not in a selfish way but in a healthy way, to be still and

to be consoled by Him? To say, as a man, that I need to be consoled is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a sign of humility.

Without consolation, we could easily be discouraged whether it is by frustration in our projects, the sheer amount of work placed upon us, the burdens of age or health, or even the negative news about priests. The Holy Father writes:

“We could become discouraged. That is why we need *consolation*. The Heart of Jesus beats for us, always repeating those words: ‘Courage. Courage. Do not be afraid! I am here! ... do not lose heart. The Lord your God is greater than your ills. He takes you by the hand and caresses you. He is close to you. He is compassionate. He is tender. He is your comfort.’ (IBID.)

Without this experience in our own lives, how could we expect to offer these words to our own people?

I conclude by simply inviting you to contemplate the love of the Heart of Christ for you, a love which surpasses human understanding. The Heart of Christ offers us a model as to how to live our vocations as priests and brothers to one another – with the style of God – with closeness, tenderness, generosity, and true passion. The Heart of Christ is a burning furnace of charity; may ours be as well.