

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
 APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
 SOUTHEAST REGIONAL ENCUESTRO
 OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE CHURCH, DORAL, FLORIDA
 SATURDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT, FEBRUARY 24, 2018**

I am delighted to be with you for this Southeast Regional Encuentro. I greet my brother bishops, and, in a special way. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to the United States, I want to express His Holiness' spiritual closeness and paternal affection for all gathered here.

The Fifth National Encuentro is dear to Pope Francis. Two years ago, as the Encuentro was beginning, the Holy Father addressed these words to the American bishops:

“Our great challenge is to create a culture of encounter, which encourages individuals and groups to share the richness of our traditions and experiences, to break down walls and to build bridges. The Church in America, as elsewhere, is called to ‘go out’ from its comfort zone and to be a leaven of communion. Communion among ourselves, with our fellow Christians, and with all who seek a future of hope. We need to become ever more fully a community of missionary disciples, filled with love of the Lord Jesus and enthusiasm for the spread of the Gospel.” (VIDEO MESSAGE TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE USCCB, 14-17 NOVEMBER 2016)

A Church of Missionary Disciples must be filled with the love of the Lord Jesus. In our Gospel today, taken from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' message is clear: love has primacy. Jesus has told his listeners that *unless their justice exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.* (5:20) He then stated what the Law of Moses said but progressively deepened the demands for His disciples. For example, the Law had prohibited killing, but Jesus demands that His disciples should not grow angry with their brother or sister. Jesus was concerned about the interior life of his followers.

Today, He begins quoting from Leviticus (19:18): “*You shall love your neighbor.*” The Scriptures, however, never say “*Hate your enemy.*” Jesus was referring to the common mentality or attitude of his day. Enemies, particularly the enemies of Israel, were to be hated, for they were opposed to the true God. For example, in the Old Testament, the Israelites waged war on the inhabitants of Canaan and on the Amalekites. Jesus intensifies the commandment to love one's neighbor by challenging his disciples to love their enemies. Effectively, Jesus is saying: “Love knows no bounds. If you want to be my disciple, your love must be without limit.”

Jesus challenges his disciples to go beyond what the tax collectors, pagans, scribes and Pharisees do. He calls them – He calls *us* – to love our enemies. It is no surprise that most people think that this is impossible. Is not our natural impulse to conquer our enemies or to seek revenge when someone hurts us or our families?

Jesus teaches that the merely natural is not enough. He calls his disciples to a supernatural charity by grace. The love that Jesus requires of his disciples is *qualitatively* different from that of the Scribes and Pharisees. If we only fulfilled the strict obligations of the Law, we would not have to love our enemies; we could be content with just loving our own. We would never become a Church that goes forth beyond our comfort zone.

Parishes and dioceses can be like that too. A parish can become so concerned about maintaining its own members and accommodating its lukewarm members, that it forgets to attract new members or even to welcome new members, especially immigrants. A self-referential church, so preoccupied with maintaining what it has, often forgets to evangelize through concrete acts of love.

In that respect, *pastoral conversion* demands asking whether we are not unlike the Pharisees, who were content to love only their neighbors and their family members. If we are to speak of authentic evangelization and outreach, then it must include loving our enemies and those who are not members of our community. Evangelization, outreach, and charitable work can never be separated from proclamation of God's love Incarnate - Jesus Christ.

The renewal of the Church is achieved, Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "through the witness offered by the lives of believers: by their very existence in the world, Christians are called to radiate the word of truth that the Lord Jesus has left us."

But what draws us to believe and to share our beliefs? St. Paul says: "*The Charity of Christ urges us on.*" (2 Cor 5:14) It is love that fills our hearts and helps us to believe. Faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy. Thus, faith and belief are not simply propositional statements such as, "Catholics believe that..." Rather it is through the experience of love that we come to believe in Him, whom we encounter in the Word and sacraments and in the actions of believers, and so come to faith and understanding.

Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt 5:48) These words seem even more difficult than the commandment to love our enemies. Perhaps, we think that we cannot be perfect – that we are sinners in a world of sinners. Here applying the words of the French author, Georges Bernanos, first to ourselves and then to others, can be helpful:

"All too late, experience has taught me that we should not evaluate people by their vices but, on the contrary, by what they have kept intact and pure, by what there is still left in them of childhood, however deep down we have to search for it."

Can we find the childlike goodness in each person, even in ourselves, and build on that? Doing so demands an examination of conscience. Even when we have made a commitment to God and faithfully carry out our duties, at a certain point, in the struggle to rediscover that childlike purity of heart, we realize that we have not fully offered ourselves to God. This represents an opportunity for a deeper conversion to God – a truly personal and profound act of self-offering before God.

Holiness – *being perfect as the Heavenly Father is perfect* – requires being conquered by God. It means letting go of ourselves and entrusting ourselves like children to the Father. This is a lifelong journey and process, one which will continue even beyond this Encuentro. This surrender means saying Yes to God entirely. This is what is demanded of every disciple and missionary and what is modelled perfectly for us by the Blessed Virgin Mary.

I entrust all of you to the Holy Virgin of Guadalupe who offers her protection and strength to all gathered and who, most importantly, offers her Son – the source of our salvation – who calls each of us to *be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*