

**HOMILY OF
HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
ST. CHARLES BORROMEO SEMINARY, PHILADELPHIA
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I am very happy to be with all of you here at St. Charles Seminary, a place with a storied history, which has produced and continues to form so many wonderful shepherds- priests whose hearts reflect the Merciful Heart of Jesus. St. Charles Borromeo himself was an ardent reformer within the Church erecting and supervising seminaries for the training of those who would bring the Merciful Love of God, especially in the sacraments, to the flock. Here in this place, we should reflect upon the privilege it is to be called and to discern the gift of the priesthood.

However, being in this place, listening to God's Word, and studying is not enough! On his last journey to Jerusalem someone asked Jesus: "*Lord, will those who are saved be few?*" And Jesus answered: "*Strive to enter by the narrow gate; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able*" (Lk 13: 23-24). There is always a temptation to think of religious practice, being in the seminary or being a priest as a source of security. Christ's exhortation is to *strive to enter by the narrow gate!* Jesus does not directly answer the man's question, but one thing is clear – the door is narrow but all may enter. This "entering" demands commitment, self-denial, and imitation of Him.

But what is this gate? In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am the gate." We must, as priests, pass into the Heart of Jesus. But how? In the first place, the priest must be a man of prayer, committed to an authentic dialogue with Him. The People of God expect their priests to be men of prayer, capable of leading them to the Heart of God. In addressing novices and religious shortly after his election, Pope Francis offered a timely reminder of the need for contemplation: "If we look towards Jesus, we see that prior to any important decision or event he recollected himself in intense and prolonged prayer. Let us cultivate the contemplative dimension, even amid the whirlwind of more urgent and heavy duties. And the more the mission calls you to go out to the margins of existence, let your heart be the more closely united to Christ's heart, full of mercy and love. Herein lies the secret of pastoral fruitfulness, of the fruitfulness of a disciple of the Lord!"

Our friendship with Christ, nourished in prayer, is, in the words of Pope Benedict, "expressed in the way of life: it is expressed with goodness of heart, with humility, meekness and mercy, love for justice and truth, a sincere and honest commitment to peace and reconciliation." (Angelus Address, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2010) We cannot simply say, "We ate and drank in your company." We must change our way of living. The priest is man who is open to conversion.

Conversion involves knowing the Heart of the Redeemer. On the Jubilee Day for Priests, Pope Francis reflected on this Heart: "There the Father's love shines forth; there I know I am welcomed and understood as I am; there, with all my sins and limitations, I know the certainty that I am chosen and loved. Contemplating that heart, I renew my first love: the memory of that time when the Lord touched my soul and called me to follow him, the memory of the joy of having cast the nets of our life upon the sea of his word (cf. Lk 5:5)." (Homily on the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, June 3, 2016)

The priest is a sinner who is a saint in the making. Entering into friendship with Him reminds us that for us- as sinners and as fragile and imperfect men- and for those entrusted to our care-

though the gate is narrow, it is not closed. We must admit “I am a sinner”, while acknowledging that there is mercy and hope! Striving to entering means being concrete about what we will leave behind, for the gate is narrow. Pope Francis says, “Upon entering the gate of Jesus, the door of faith and of the Gospel, we can get out from worldly attitudes, bad habits, by selfishness and by our own closures. When there is contact with the love and mercy of God, there is a real change.” (Angelus Address, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2016)

Yes, our experience of God’s mercy transforms us to go out- to the peripheries- to seek and find what was lost! Mercy makes us pass from the recognition that we have received mercy to a desire to show mercy to others. We can feel within us a healthy tension between sorrow for our sins and the dignity that the Lord has bestowed on us. Being called is not enough to enter through the narrow gate, we must respond to the graces given to us from the Heart of Christ as priests. Think of the contrast between Judas and Peter, who though a sinner experienced God’s mercy!

Listen to how the Holy Father describes the priest of Jesus Christ: “He 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.” (Homily on the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, June 3, 2016)

Shortly after his election, at his first Chrism Mass, the Pope commented on this “anointing” of the priest *and* of his People: “A good priest can be recognized by the way his people are anointed: this is a clear proof. When our people are anointed with the oil of gladness, it is obvious: for example, when they leave Mass looking as if they have heard good news. Our people like to hear the Gospel preached with “unction”, they like it when the Gospel we preach touches their daily lives, when it runs down like the oil of Aaron to the edges of reality, when it brings light to moments of extreme darkness, to the “outskirts” where people of faith are most exposed to the onslaught of those who want to tear down their faith. People thank us because they feel that we have prayed over the realities of their everyday lives, their troubles, their joys, their burdens and their hopes. And when they feel that the fragrance of the Anointed One, of Christ, has come to them through us, they feel encouraged to entrust to us everything they want to bring before the Lord.”

The Church today needs priests who are close to their people, who have the “smell of the sheep”, so that the people may know that God is close to them. There are some at the peripheries who think they can never be forgiven or who are unworthy of God’s love. You must be generous, tireless in your service as instrument of His mercy through which you draw men and women closer to the Heart of God- to enter through that narrow gate. With Christ, the Priest and Victim, you must say, “this is my body, which is given up for you.”