

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE**  
**APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**  
**WEDNESDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT, MARCH 27, 2019**  
**ST. MARY SEMINARY, BALTIMORE**

My Dear Friends,

It has been good to spend this day together, reflecting during this Lenten Season on our vocation and our mission. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to this country, I want to express my joy and gratitude for the opportunity to be with you, but also to express His Holiness' personal closeness and paternal affection for you and to assure you of his prayers. Allow me to thank the Administration and Faculty for their difficult yet vital work in the service of the Church in forming seminarians.

Seminarians are very close to the heart of the Pope. During the Angelus address on the First Sunday of Lent, Pope Francis recalled the nine newly beatified seminarian martyrs of Oviedo, Spain, saying:

“These young aspirants to the priesthood loved the Lord so much as to follow Him on the way to the Cross. Their heroic witness helps seminarians, priests and bishops to remain pure and generous, faithfully serving the Lord and the Holy People of God. With the sanctity of their lives, the newly beatified speak above all to the Church of today. With their blood, they have made the Church great and have given splendor to the priesthood. We are all troubled by the scandals that seem to have no end and that disfigure the face of the Bride of Christ. We need seminarians, priests, consecrated persons, generous pastors like these martyrs of Oviedo.” (POPE FRANCIS, ANGELUS ADDRESS, FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT, 10 MARCH 2019)

What type of priests does the Church need today? The Holy Father is clear about their characteristics. We need men who are pure and generous; faithful in service; holy and self-giving; and so utterly convicted of the promises offered by Christ that they are willing to witness to Him publicly.

What type of priests does the Church need today? Certainly, she needs faithful priests. In the first reading from Deuteronomy, Moses spoke to the people, exhorting them: *Observe the commandments carefully, for thus you will give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, “This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.”*

Seminary is a privileged time and place for studying philosophy and theology, but knowledge of the law is not enough. Observation of the law is essential; this should not be rooted in fear of punishment, nor in the idea that external observance will make us good priests; rather, our motivation needs to be the love of God. After all, *to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength* is the first and greatest of the commandments. Knowledge is not the equivalent of wisdom; wisdom, St. Bonaventure says, is knowledge infused with charity. Do you love God? Do you love your neighbor? Our love urges on to give Him witness. The Spanish seminarians did not die for a law; they died for their God who gave the Law. Our conviction by love and commitment to it gives witness to true wisdom and intelligence.

What type of priests does the Church need today? She needs priests who, animated by the love of God, are close to the people. Moses continues: *For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him.* Our God is close to us. He is with us in Christ

Jesus, especially in His Word and in the Eucharist. He is close to us in prayer and in the Mystical Body of Christ. Do you know this closeness? Do you experience it in prayer?

Right from the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis encouraged us to be a Church that goes forth to the spiritual and existential peripheries and to have the smell of the sheep. He wants us to communicate the tenderness of God. He called the Jubilee Year of Mercy to remind us that God draws near, even to sinners, to heal and restore them to His friendship. Our world has enough self-righteous, judgmental people, all too eager to condemn. The Church needs priests who are willing to be living signs of God's Merciful Presence.

What type of priests does the Church need today? She needs priests who attract and inspire. God has called you to something great. He has not called you to be a bureaucrat or functionary, who carries out tasks like a robot; rather, he has made you – flesh and blood. It is important to grow in our awareness of who we are and to have, as I have said many times, a genuine affection for ourselves, but not in a self-referential way. The different pillars of formation all build upon the human pillar. St. Thomas would say: Grace does not destroy our nature but perfects it. God comes to sanctify us. He wants real human beings who are willing to engage others – to meet them in their humanity and to inspire them by word and deed; to attract them with a smile and human warmth; and draw them by kindness and gentleness into a deeper relationship with Him.

The people want priests who are both prayerful and willing to spend time with them, who are genuinely concerned for them and their families. The lay faithful genuinely desire priests who are willing to encounter them and refuse to be indifferent to suffering, and, I would add, this is what the Holy Father wants as well. The Pope said:

“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.” (HOMILY, SOLEMNITY OF THE SACRED HEART, JUBILEE FOR PRIESTS, 3 JUNE 2016)

What type of priests does the Church need today? The Church needs priests who are willing to go out of their comfort zone and who are willing to reject worldliness. For us to better understand this, we need to look closer at the context of our Gospel passage. It comes from the fifth chapter of the Sermon on the Mount. The chapter begins with the Beatitudes, which provide a whole new way of looking at the world and which offer some idea of what the interior dispositions of the disciples of Jesus ought to be. After the Beatitudes, Jesus tells His disciples that they are “the salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.” As salt, they are to purify and preserve from corruption and are to add flavor to this world. As light, they are to dispel the darkness of error; offer hope to those who find themselves in misery and sin; and illuminate the way for others to find the path that leads to life.

With today's Gospel, which is just two verses, Jesus tells His disciples that He has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He is very clear: *Whoever obeys and teaches the commandments will be called greatest in the Kingdom of God.* As future ministers of the Church, there is an expectation that you will be faithful to the Church's discipline and teaching. People expect, and indeed, they have a right to the authentic, living Tradition of the Church and to the sacraments.

Nevertheless, Jesus is talking about something deeper, because the next line of the Gospel reads: *Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter into the Kingdom.*

Jesus demands that those who belong to Him go beyond merely parroting with their lips the commandments of the law. He wants them to go out of their comfort zone, performing external actions for others to see. He demands interior change – conversion of life, true obedience to the Law of Love. He will continue to tell his disciples not to grow angry, not to lust, to turn the other cheek, and to go the extra mile. This is what Jesus really demands of us – *fidelity of heart*. An integrated priest is faithful to the commandments of God – faithful in deed and faithful in heart, modelling the fidelity and obedience of Jesus, our High Priest.

The Holy Father reminds us:

“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)

I know it is not easy to be a priest today, and many will discourage you from continuing on the path that you have begun. Do not give up! Jesus will be faithful to you, and He asks your help in showing others the Merciful Face of the Father. Today, the Church needs generous, holy, and faithful men like you!