

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
WEDNESDAY OF THE FOURTH WEEK OF LENT, MARCH 29, 2017
SPRING GATHERING OF DIOCESAN DIRECTORS OF CATHOLIC CHARITIES
ST. JOSEPH CHURCH, WASHINGTON, DC

I am very pleased to be here at St. Joseph Church this morning and in a special way I wish to greet the Diocesan Directors of Catholic Charities, who are here for their annual Spring Gathering. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Pope's personal representative in this country, I wish to express the Holy Father's personal closeness to each of you and to express his gratitude for the many good works of Catholic Charities in bringing God's love to those at the peripheries.

In our first reading from Isaiah, the Israelites were the ones at the peripheries. They were in exile. Isaiah describes the return of Israel into her homeland and the reconstruction of Jerusalem. There is an announcement of joy and hope that involves all of creation: *Sing out, O heavens, and rejoice, O earth, break forth into song, you mountains. For the Lord comforts his people and shows mercy to his afflicted.*

All of humanity and creation are invited to rejoice, for the Lord never abandons his people. He never forgets them. Even if a mother forgets her child, God will never forget his people (cf. Is 49:15). Yes, even if we distance ourselves from God through sin, God never abandons us; rather, he seeks us out or searches for a way to bring us back. The Old Testament is filled with stories of Israel turning her back on God, making alliances with other nations and falling into false worship. Those actions have consequences, but at some point, the Lord pours out his mercy once more.

In a time of favor, I answer you; on the day of salvation I help you. (Is 49:8) Some translations speak of a *time of mercy*. We might say that the whole history of Israel was really a time of mercy. Despite the people's infidelity, God remained faithful, and, after a period of purification, the Lord decided to restore the land and to bring prisoners and exiles out of darkness, promising prosperity and peace. God is not the severe judge; rather, the *Lord is gracious and merciful*, as the Psalmist says. He is one who draws close to His people with the tenderness of a parent toward a child: *Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. (Is 49:15)*

It is true that our sins have consequences. They alienate us from God. We send ourselves into a type of exile – distancing ourselves from God, neighbor, and the Church. At times, sin is deadly, and we are like those in the tombs, yet God finds a way to bring us back – to call us to life. *Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation.* Yes, our God is the God of Life and the God of Mercy!

This has been a central thrust of the Pontificate of Pope Francis, from his episcopal motto *Miserando atque eligendo* to the Jubilee Year for Mercy. God draws close to the sinner – to shower him with his mercy and to comfort his people – to restore him or her to life. Nothing of what a repentant sinner places before God's mercy can be excluded from the embrace of his forgiveness.

There is still time during this Lent to experience the power of God's mercy. In his letter concluding the Jubilee Year, the Holy Father wrote:

Mercy cannot become a mere parenthesis in the life of the Church; it constitutes her very existence, through which the profound truths of the Gospel are made manifest and tangible. Everything is revealed in mercy; everything is resolved in the merciful love of the Father. (*Misericordia et Misera*, 1)

It is the mission of the Church to make known that God has come to save us from our sins and to restore us to life. To understand the depths of God's mercy, we might reflect upon the fact, that it was not enough for Him merely to become one of us in the Mystery of the Incarnation. God took things one step further to win our hearts, as St. Paul says in the letter to the Romans: *For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would even dare to die. But God shows his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us* (Rom 5:7-8).

This morning let us fix our gaze upon the Cross to contemplate once more the immense love God has for us, giving thanks to God for the mercy we have received - that mercy which transforms and changes our life; that mercy which calls us to show mercy to others.