

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
OPENING OF FORTY HOURS DEVOTION
THURSDAY OF THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT, MARCH 23, 2017
NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, WASHINGTON, DC

I am very happy to be with you as we open this Forty Hours Devotion here at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. I want to thank Monsignor Rossi for his kind invitation and to all who make this Shrine a beautiful place to celebrate God's dwelling in the midst of His People. As the Holy Father's personal representative, I wish to assure you and all those watching on television of his spiritual closeness during these days as we deepen our faith in the Holy Eucharist, the "source and summit of all life in the Church."

Yesterday, we heard from the Book of Deuteronomy. Moses invited the people to listen: "*Hear, O Israel, the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live...*" (Dt 4:1) Listening to God is the way of wisdom and life. God chose to be close to his people and to give them the gift of the Law.

Today, the prophet Jeremiah takes up the same theme as Moses: "*Listen to my voice; then I will be your God and you shall be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you so that you may prosper.*" (Jer 7:23) Unfortunately, the people of Israel did not listen to the voice of the Lord.

We too struggle to listen to God's voice. It is not so easy in a world marked by noise, shouting, and arguing – a world without silence. Often, we struggle to listen to the voice of God, preferring to place our trust in our own voice, convictions, attitudes, customs, even religious traditions, especially when it will benefit us personally. In these moments, we do not entrust ourselves to the Lord, choosing to rely on our own ways, not unlike Israel. Even when we hear his voice, we sometimes harden our hearts, lacking the courage to do what we know to be just and right.

Nevertheless, the Lord does not cease to send prophets to His people to break through their deafness and the hardness of their hearts: *From the day that your fathers left the land of Egypt even to this day, I have sent you untiringly all my servants the prophets. Yet they have not obeyed me nor paid heed; they have stiffened their necks and done worse than their fathers.* (Jer 7: 25-26).

The Lord does not grow tired of trying to win the hearts of his people. He continues sending prophets, knowing that *when you speak all these words to them, they will not listen to you either; when you call them, they will not answer.* (Jer 7:27)

God knows our stubbornness, but he will not resign himself to losing us. He wants to win our hearts. He sent Jeremiah to speak with clarity, hiding nothing from the people about how He saw them: *This is the nation that does not listen to the voice of the Lord, its God, or take correction. Faithfulness has disappeared; the word itself is banished from their speech.*" (Jer 7:28)

The insistence of the Lord in sending prophets is similar to the sower in the Gospel parable who throws seed everywhere, hoping that it might grow and bear fruit abundantly. The soil, however, is the human heart. The invitation of the Psalmist is to *harden not your hearts*. St. Alphonsus Liguori says, "Paradise for God is the human heart." God wants to dwell there!

God insists on sending prophets to win our love because he wants to be close to us. But God was not satisfied with giving us as gifts of love all the wonders of creation, the justice and beauty of the Law, or even the prophets. To win our love he has gone so far as to give all of Himself to us. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.* (John 3:16)

When the Eternal Father saw us dead in sin, with hearts of stone which could not beat, what did He do? In his immense love, He sent his beloved Son, to make atonement for us and to restore us to life. In giving us His Son, He gave us everything that is good – his grace, love, forgiveness, and Paradise.

God could have saved us without suffering and dying, but to prove His love for us, He chose to be rejected, as had all the prophets, and to die on the Cross. What could have ever led God to do such a preposterous thing? St. Bernard of Clairvaux says, “It was love, careless of its dignity.”

Saint Bernadine of Siena says that people remember more vividly the signs of love shown them in death. For example, friends usually leave one another a token of affection – a ring, a family heirloom, a painting. But what did Jesus leave us at Calvary? He left us everything! He left nothing for Himself!

He gives us everything once more in the Eucharist whom we receive at this Mass and whom we adore upon the altar! It is the Sacrament of His love! St. Francis De Sales says, “In no other action can the Savior be considered more tender or more loving than in this one, where he annihilates himself, so to say, and reduces himself to food, to penetrate our souls and to unite himself to the hearts of his faithful.”

How can we close our hearts to this love? These Forty Hours of Devotion allow us to ponder this marvelous love. These are moments of grace to hear his Word and welcome it in silence, just as Mary did in conceiving the Savior. This is the acceptable time to open our hearts to his love and to rediscover our vocation as prophets of the Lord and as missionary disciples reminding people of God’s closeness to them. *What other people has a God so close to it as we have?!!!* In the Eucharist, God is close. He comes to be with His people. He calls us, inspired by the Eucharistic love we have received, to be prophetic witnesses to His love! He calls. *If today, you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.*