

## When prophets speak...

**Pope Francis' addresses to Priests and Religious  
in his journey to Cuba, to the United States of America**

### POOR AMONG THE POOREST

**Celebration of Vespers with Priests and Religious  
Cathedral, Havana, Sunday, 20 September 2015**

Cardinal Jaime spoke to us about poverty and Sister Yaileny (Sister Yaileny Ponce Torres, D.C.) spoke to us about the little ones: "They are all children". I had prepared a homily to give now, based on the biblical texts, but when prophets speak — every priest is a prophet, all the baptized are prophets, every consecrated person is a prophet — then we should listen to them. So I'm going to give the homily to Cardinal Jaime so that he can get it to you and you can make it known. Later you can meditate on it. And now let's talk a little about what these two prophets said.

#### **Poverty, the wall and the mother of consecrated life**

Cardinal Jaime happened to say a very uncomfortable word, an extremely uncomfortable word, one which goes against the whole "cultural" structure of our world. He said "poverty", and he repeated it several times. I think the Lord wanted us to keep hearing it, and to receive it in our hearts. The spirit of the world doesn't know this word, doesn't like it, hides it — not for shame, but for scorn. And if it has to sin and offend God in order to avoid poverty, then that's what it does. The spirit of the world does not love the way of the Son of God, who emptied himself, became poor, became nothing, abased himself in order to be one of us.

Poverty frightened that generous young man who had kept all the commandments; and so when Jesus told him, "Go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor", he was saddened. He was afraid of poverty. We are always trying to hide poverty, perhaps with good reason; but I'm talking about hiding it in our hearts. It is our duty to know how to administer our goods, for they are a gift from God. But when these goods enter your heart and begin to take over your life, that's where you can get lost. Then you are no longer like Jesus. Then you have your security where the sad young man had his, the one who went away sad.

For you, priests, consecrated men and women, I think what Saint Ignatius said could be useful to you (and this is not just family propaganda here!). He said that poverty was the wall and the mother of consecrated life; the "mother" because it gives birth to greater confidence in God, and the "wall" because it protects us from all worldliness. How many ruined souls there are! Generous souls, like that of the sad young man: they started out well, then gradually became attached to the love of this wealthy worldliness and ended up badly. They ended up mediocre. They ended up without love because wealth impoverishes us, in a bad way. It takes away the best that we have, and strips us of the only wealth which is truly worthwhile, so that we put our security in something else.

The spirit of poverty, the spirit of detachment, the spirit of leaving everything behind in order to follow Jesus. This leaving everything is not something I am inventing. It appears frequently in the Gospel. In the calling of the first ones who left their boat, their nets, and followed him. Those who left everything to follow Jesus.

A wise old priest once told me about what happens when the spirit of wealth, of wealthy worldliness enters the heart of a consecrated man or woman, a priest or bishop, or even a Pope — anyone. He said that when we start to save up money to ensure our future — isn't this true? — then our future is not in Jesus, but in a kind of spiritual insurance company which we manage. When, for example, a religious congregation begins to gather money and save, God is so good that he sends them a terrible bursar who brings them to bankruptcy. Such terrible bursars are some of the greatest

blessings God grants his Church, because they make her free, they make her poor. Our Holy Mother the Church is poor; God wants her poor as he wanted our Holy Mother Mary to be poor.

So love poverty, like a mother. I would just suggest, should any of you want, that you ask yourself: "How is my spirit of poverty doing? How is my interior detachment?" I think this may be good for our consecrated life, our priestly life. After all, let us not forget that this is the first of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit", those who are not attached to riches, to the powers of this world.

### **To "burn" our lives, caressing what is discarded**

Sister also spoke to us of the least, of the little ones, who, whatever their age, we end up treating like children because they act like children. The least, the little ones. These are words that Jesus used, words that appear in the list of things on which we will be judged: "What you did to the least of these brothers and sisters, you did to me". There are pastoral services which may be more gratifying, from a human point of view, without being bad or worldly. But when we seek above all to prefer serving the little one, the outcast, the sick, those who are overlooked and unloved... when we serve these little ones, we serve Jesus in the best way possible.

So you were sent where you didn't want to go, and you cried. You cried because you didn't like it — which doesn't mean that you are a "whimpering nun", right? May God free us from whimpering nuns who are always complaining. This phrase isn't mine; Saint Teresa of Avila said this to her nuns; it's her phrase. Woe to the nun who goes about all day moaning and groaning because she suffered an injustice. In the Castilian Spanish of that age, she said: "Woe to the nun who goes about saying, 'they treated me badly for no reason'".

You cried because you were young, you had other dreams, perhaps you thought that in a school you could do more, that you could organize young people's futures. And they sent you there, to the "House of Mercy", where the tenderness and the mercy of God are most clearly shown, where the tenderness and the mercy of God become a caress. How many women and men religious "burn" — let me say it again, "burn" — their lives, caressing what is discarded, caressing those whom the world throws away, whom the world despises, whom the world wishes did not exist, those whom today's world, with new technologies, when it looks like they may come with a degenerative illness, thinks of "sending them back" before they are born. The little ones. A young woman full of dreams begins her consecrated life by making God's tenderness, in his mercy, alive. At times they do not understand, they have no idea, but how wonderful it is for God, and how much good it does us, for example, when a person with palsy tries to smile, or when they want to kiss you and they dribble on your face. That is the tenderness of God. That is the mercy of God. Or when they are upset and they hit you. "Burning" my life like this, with what the world would discard: that speaks to us of one person alone. It speaks to us of Jesus, who out of the sheer mercy of the Father became nothing. He "emptied himself", says the text of Philippians, Chapter Two. He became nothing. And these people to whom you dedicate your life imitate Jesus, not because they wanted to, but because this is the way they came into the world. They are nothing, they are kept out of sight, hidden; no one comes to see them. And if it is possible, and there's still time, they get "sent back".

So thank you for what you do and, through you, I thank all those many women consecrated to the service of those considered "useless", since they cannot start a business, make money or do anything "constructive" at all — these brothers and sisters of ours, these little ones, the least among us. There Jesus shines forth! And that is where my decision for Jesus shines forth. I thank you and all the consecrated men and women who do this.

### **The confessional, a special place to find the littlest**

"Father, I'm not a nun. I don't take care of sick people. I'm a priest, and I have a parish, or I assist the pastor of a parish. Who is my beloved Jesus? Who is the little one? Who shows me most the mercy of the Father? Where must I find him or her?" Obviously I continue following the sequence of Matthew 25; there you have all of them: the hungry, the imprisoned, the sick — there you will meet

them. But there is a special place for the priest, where the last, the least and the littlest is found — and that is in the confessional. And there, when this man or this woman shows you their misery, take care, because it is the same misery as yours, the misery from which God saved you. Is that the case? When they reveal their misery to you, please don't give them a hard time. Don't scold them or punish them. If you are without sin, you can throw the first stone. But only then. Otherwise, think about your own sins; think that you could be that person. Think that you could potentially fall even lower, and think that in this moment you hold in your hands a treasure, which is the Father's mercy. Please — I'm speaking to the priests — never tire of forgiving. Be forgivers. Like Jesus, never tire of forgiving. Don't hide behind fear or inflexibility. Just as this Sister — and all those in the same ministry as she is — do not become irate when they find a sick person who is dirty, but instead they serve him, clean him, take care of him. In the same way, when a penitent confesses, don't get upset or worked up, don't cast him out of the confessional, don't give them a hard time. Jesus embraced them. Jesus loved them. Tomorrow, we celebrate the feast of Saint Matthew. He was a thief; he even, in a way, betrayed his own people. And the Gospel says that that evening Jesus went to have supper with him and others like him. Saint Ambrose has a phrase which I find very moving: "Where there is mercy, the Spirit of Jesus is there; where there is rigor, his ministers alone are there".

Brother priest, brother bishop, do not be afraid of mercy. Let it flow through your hands and through your forgiving embrace, for the man or woman before you is one of the little ones. They are Jesus. This is what I thought I should say after hearing these two prophets. May the Lord give us these graces that these two have sown in our hearts: poverty and mercy. Because that is where Jesus is.

## Our vocation is to be lived in joy

*Vespers with Priests and Religious*

*St Patrick's Cathedral, New York, Thursday, 24 September 2015*

I have two thoughts today for my Muslim brothers and sisters. First, my good wishes as you celebrate today the day of sacrifice. I wish my greetings could have been warmer. Second, my closeness, on account of the tragedy which your people experienced today in Mecca. In this moment of prayer, I join, and all of us join, in praying to God, our almighty and merciful Father.

We have heard the Apostle say: "There is a cause for rejoicing here", although "you may for a time have to suffer the distress of many trials" (*I Pet 1:6*). These words remind us of something essential. Our vocation is to be lived in joy.

This beautiful Cathedral of Saint Patrick, built up over many years through the sacrifices of many men and women, can serve as a symbol of the work of generations of American priests and religious, and lay faithful who helped build up the Church in the United States. In the field of education alone, how many priests and religious in this country played a central role, assisting parents in handing on to their children the food that nourishes them for life! Many did so at the cost of extraordinary sacrifice and with heroic charity. I think for example of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, who founded the first free Catholic school for girls in America, or Saint John Neumann, the founder of the first system of Catholic education in the United States.

This evening, my brothers and sisters, I have come to join you — priests and men and women of consecrated life — in praying that our vocations will continue to build up the great edifice of God's Kingdom in this country. I know that, as a presbyterate in the midst of God's people, you suffered greatly in the not distant past by having to bear the shame of some of your brothers who harmed and scandalized the Church in the most vulnerable of her members... In the words of the Book of Revelation, I say that you "have come forth from the great tribulation" (*Rev 7:14*). I accompany you at this moment of pain and difficulty, and I thank God for your faithful service to his people. In the hope of helping you to persevere on the path of fidelity to Jesus Christ, I would like to offer two brief reflections.

## The spirit of gratitude

The first concerns *the spirit of gratitude*. The joy of men and women who love God attracts others to him; priests and religious are called to find and radiate lasting satisfaction in their vocation. Joy springs from a grateful heart. Truly, we have received much, so many graces, so many blessings, and we rejoice in this. It will do us good to think back on our lives with the grace of remembrance. Remembrance of when we were first called, remembrance of the road travelled, remembrance of graces received... and, above all, remembrance of our encounter with Jesus Christ so often along the way. Remembrance of the amazement which our encounter with Jesus Christ awakens in our hearts. My brothers and sisters, men and women of consecrated life, and priests! Let us seek the grace of remembrance so as to grow in the spirit of gratitude. Let us ask ourselves: are we good at counting our blessings, or have we forgotten them?

## The spirit of hard work

A second area is *the spirit of hard work*. A grateful heart is spontaneously impelled to serve the Lord and to find expression in a life of commitment to our work. Once we come to realize how much God has given us, a life of self-sacrifice, of working for him and for others, becomes a privileged way of responding to his great love.

Yet, if we are honest, we know how easily this spirit of generous self-sacrifice can be damped. There are a couple of ways that this can happen; both ways are examples of that “spiritual worldliness” which weakens our commitment as men and women of consecrated life to serve, and diminishes the wonder, the amazement, of our first encounter with Christ.

We can get caught up measuring the value of our apostolic works by the standards of efficiency, good management and outward success which govern the business world. Not that these things are unimportant! We have been entrusted with a great responsibility, and God’s people rightly expect accountability from us. But the true worth of our apostolate is measured by the value it has in God’s eyes. To see and evaluate things from God’s perspective calls for constant conversion in the first days and years of our vocation and, need I say, it calls for great humility. The cross shows us a different way of measuring success. Ours is to plant the seeds: God sees to the fruits of our labors. And if at times our efforts and works seem to fail and produce no fruit, we need to remember that we are followers of Jesus... and his life, humanly speaking, ended in failure, in the failure of the cross.

The other danger comes when we become jealous of our free time, when we think that surrounding ourselves with worldly comforts will help us serve better. The problem with this reasoning is that it can blunt the power of God’s daily call to conversion, to encounter with him. Slowly but surely, it diminishes our spirit of sacrifice, our spirit of renunciation and hard work. It also alienates people who suffer material poverty and are forced to make greater sacrifices than ourselves, without being consecrated. Rest is needed, as are moments of leisure and self-enrichment, but we need to learn how to rest in a way that deepens our desire to serve with generosity. Closeness to the poor, the refugee, the immigrant, the sick, the exploited, the elderly living alone, prisoners and all God’s other poor, will teach us a different way of resting, one which is more Christian and generous.

Gratitude and hard work: these are two pillars of the spiritual life which I have wanted, this evening, to share with you priests and religious. I thank you for prayers and work, and the daily sacrifices you make in the various areas of your apostolate. Many of these are known only to God, but they bear rich fruit for the life of the Church.

In a special way I would like to express my esteem and my gratitude to the religious women of the United States. What would the Church be without you? Women of strength, fighters, with that spirit of courage which puts you in the front lines in the proclamation of the Gospel. To you, religious women, sisters and mothers of this people, I wish to say “thank you”, a big thank you... and to tell you that I love you very much.

I know that many of you are in the front lines in meeting the challenges of adapting to an evolving pastoral landscape. Whatever difficulties and trials you face, I ask you, like Saint Peter, to be

at peace and to respond to them as Christ did: he thanked the Father, took up his cross and looked forward!

Dear brothers and sisters, shortly, in a few minutes, we will sing the Magnificat. Let us commend to Our Lady the work we have been entrusted to do; let us join her in thanking God for the great things he has done, and for the great things he will continue to do in us and in those whom we have the privilege to serve. Amen.

## **“What about you? What are you going to do?”**

*Holy Mass with Bishops, Clergy and Religious of Pennsylvania,  
Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, Philadelphia, Saturday, 26 September 2015*

This morning I learned something about the history of this beautiful Cathedral: the story behind its high walls and windows. I would like to think, though, that the history of the Church in this city and state is really a story not about building walls, but about breaking them down. It is a story about generation after generation of committed Catholics going out to the peripheries, and building communities of worship, education, charity and service to the larger society.

That story is seen in the many shrines which dot this city, and the many parish churches whose towers and steeples speak of God’s presence in the midst of our communities. It is seen in the efforts of all those dedicated priests, religious and laity who for over two centuries have ministered to the spiritual needs of the poor, the immigrant, the sick and those in prison. And it is seen in the hundreds of schools where religious brothers and sisters trained children to read and write, to love God and neighbor, and to contribute as good citizens to the life of American society. All of this is a great legacy which you have received, and which you have been called to enrich and pass on.

Most of you know the story of Saint Katharine Drexel, one of the great saints raised up by this local Church. When she spoke to Pope Leo XIII of the needs of the missions, the Pope – he was a very wise Pope! – asked her pointedly: “What about you? What are you going to do?”. Those words changed Katharine’s life, because they reminded her that, in the end, every Christian man and woman, by virtue of baptism, has received a mission. Each one of us has to respond, as best we can, to the Lord’s call to build up his Body, the Church.

“What about you?” I would like to dwell on two aspects of these words in the context of our specific mission to transmit the joy of the Gospel and to build up the Church, whether as priests, deacons, or men and women who belong to institutes of consecrated life.

First, those words – “What about you?” – were addressed to a young person, a young woman with high ideals, and they changed her life. They made her think of the immense work that had to be done, and to realize that she was being called to do her part. How many young people in our parishes and schools have the same high ideals, generosity of spirit, and love for Christ and the Church! I ask you: Do we challenge them? Do we make space for them and help them to do their part? To find ways of sharing their enthusiasm and gifts with our communities, above all in works of mercy and concern for others? Do we share our own joy and enthusiasm in serving the Lord?

One of the great challenges facing the Church in this generation is to foster in all the faithful a sense of personal responsibility for the Church’s mission, and to enable them to fulfill that responsibility as missionary disciples, as a leaven of the Gospel in our world. This will require creativity in adapting to changed situations, carrying forward the legacy of the past not primarily by maintaining our structures and institutions, which have served us well, but above all by being open to the possibilities which the Spirit opens up to us and communicating the joy of the Gospel, daily and in every season of our life.

“What about you?” It is significant that these words of the elderly Pope were also addressed to a lay woman. We know that the future of the Church in a rapidly changing society will call, and even now calls, for a much more active engagement on the part of the laity. The Church in the United States has always devoted immense effort to the work of catechesis and education. Our challenge

today is to build on those solid foundations and to foster a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility in planning for the future of our parishes and institutions. This does not mean relinquishing the spiritual authority with which we have been entrusted; rather, it means discerning and employing wisely the manifold gifts which the Spirit pours out upon the Church. In a particular way, it means valuing the immense contribution which women, lay and religious, have made and continue to make, in the life of our communities.

Dear brothers and sisters, I thank you for the way in which each of you has answered Jesus' question which inspired your own vocation: "What about you?". I encourage you to be renewed in the joy and wonder of that first encounter with Jesus, and to draw from that joy renewed fidelity and strength. I look forward to being with you in these days and I ask you to bring my affectionate greetings to those who could not be with us, especially the many elderly priests and men and women religious who join us in spirit.

During these days of the World Meeting of Families, I would ask you in a particular way to reflect on our ministry to families, to couples preparing for marriage, and to our young people. I know how much is being done in the local Churches to respond to the needs of families and to support them in their journey of faith. I ask you to pray fervently for them, and for the deliberations of the forthcoming Synod on the Family.

Now, with gratitude for all we have received, and with confident assurance in all our needs, we turn to Mary, our Blessed Mother. With a mother's love, may she intercede for the growth of the Church in America in prophetic witness to the power of her Son's Cross to bring joy, hope and strength into our world. I pray for each of you, and I ask you, please, to pray for me.