



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO CUBA, TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AND VISIT TO THE UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS
(19-28 SEPTEMBER 2015)

**CELEBRATION OF VESPERS WITH PRIESTS, MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS AND
SEMINARIANS**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Cathedral, Havana
Sunday, 20 September 2015

[Multimedia]

Unprepared remarks by the Holy Father:

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.

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.

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.

“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.

We are gathered in this historic Cathedral of Havana to sing with psalms the faithfulness of God towards his people, with thanksgiving for his presence and his infinite mercy. A faithfulness and mercy not only commemorated by this building, but also by the living memory of some of the elderly among us, who know from experience that "his mercy endures forever and his faithfulness throughout the ages". For this, brothers and sisters, let us together give thanks.

Let us give thanks for the Spirit's presence in the rich and diverse charisms of all those missionaries who came to this land and became Cubans among Cubans, a sign that God's mercy is eternal.

The Gospel presents Jesus in dialogue with his Father. It brings us to the heart of the prayerful intimacy between the Father and the Son. As his hour drew near, Jesus prayed for his disciples, for those with him and for those who were yet to come (cf. *Jn 17:20*). We do well to remember that, in that crucial moment, Jesus made the lives of his disciples, our lives, a part of his prayer. He asked his Father to keep them united and joyful. Jesus knew full well the hearts of his disciples, and he knows full well our own. And so he prays to the Father to save them from a spirit

of isolation, of finding refuge in their own certainties and comfort zones, of indifference to others and division into “cliques” which disfigure the richly diverse face of the Church. These are situations which lead to a kind of isolation and ennui, a sadness that slowly gives rise to resentment, to constant complaint, to boredom; this “is not God’s will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2) to which he invited them, to which he has invited us. That is why Jesus prays that sadness and isolation will not prevail in our hearts. We want to do the same, we want to join in Jesus’ prayer, in his words, so that we can say together: “Father, keep them in your name... that they may be one, even as we are one” (*Jn 17:11*), “that your joy may be complete” (*Jn 15:11*).

Jesus prays and he invites us to pray, because he knows that some things can only be received as gifts; some things can only be experienced as gifts. Unity is a grace which can be bestowed upon us only by the Holy Spirit; we have to ask for this grace and do our best to be transformed by that gift.

Unity is often confused with uniformity; with actions, feelings and words which are all identical. This is not unity, it is conformity. It kills the life of the Spirit; it kills the charisms which God has bestowed for the good of his people. Unity is threatened whenever we try to turn others into our own image and likeness. Unity is a gift, not something to be imposed by force or by decree. I am delighted to see you here, men and women of different generations, backgrounds and experiences, all united by our common prayer. Let us ask God to increase our desire to be close to one another. To be neighbors, always there for one another, with all our many differences, interests and ways of seeing things. To speak straightforwardly, despite our disagreements and disputes, and not behind each other’s backs. May we be shepherds who are close to our people, open to their questions and problems. Conflicts and disagreements in the Church are to be expected and, I would even say, needed. They are a sign that the Church is alive and that the Spirit is still acting, still enlivening her. Woe to those communities without a “yes” and a “no”! They are like married couples who no longer argue, because they have lost interest, they have lost their love.

The Lord prays also that we may be filled with his own “complete joy” (cf. *Jn 17:13*). The joy of Christians, and especially of consecrated men and women, is a very clear sign of Christ’s presence in their lives. When we see sad faces, it is a warning that something is wrong. Significantly, this is the request which Jesus makes of the Father just before he goes out to the Garden to renew his own “*fial*”. I am certain that all of you have had to bear many sacrifices and, for some of you, for several decades now, these sacrifices have proved difficult. Jesus prays, at the moment of his own sacrifice, that we will never lose the joy of knowing that he overcomes the world. This certainty is what inspires us, morning after morning, to renew our faith. “With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy” – by his prayer, and in the faces of our people – Christ “makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 3).

How important, how valuable for the life of the Cuban people, is this witness which always and everywhere radiates such joy, despite our weariness, our misgivings and even our despair, that dangerous temptation which eats away at our soul!

Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus prays that all of us may be one, and that his joy may abide within us. May we do likewise, as we unite ourselves to one another in prayer.

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