

“The Primacy of Charity in the Mutual Search for Communion with God”

Homily for the First Profession of Vows of the Missionaries of Charity

May 21, 2016, Mission Dolores Basilica

(Readings: Sg 2:8-14; Ps 45; 1 Cor 1:22-31; Mt 25:1-13)

Introduction

It is often said that the Christian religion is not about man's search for God, but God's search for man. As is often pointed out, the most poignant image of this reality – and an image taken over by the Church in her liturgy – comes to us from Scripture: that of a lover in search of His beloved. This is the imagery that certainly comes through in our first reading, and it explains why the book of the Song of Songs, a collection of love poems bespeaking the love of a bride and groom betrothed to each other, finds itself within the canon of Sacred Scripture.

The Mutual Search

Love always impels the lover toward union with the beloved, and it is for this reason that saints and scholars from ancient times have seen here in the book of the Song of Songs a deeper, mystical meaning. They see here the image of the intimacy of God's love for us, which is that of a nuptial union.

We hear a reflection about this from Pope Benedict XVI in his first Encyclical, *God is Love*. He says there that

... the reception of the *Song of Songs* in the canon of sacred Scripture was soon explained by the idea that these love songs ultimately describe God's relation to man and man's relation to God. Thus the *Song of Songs* became, both in Christian and Jewish literature, a source of mystical knowledge and experience, an expression of the essence of biblical faith: that man can indeed enter into union with God—his primordial aspiration. But this union is no mere fusion, a sinking in the nameless ocean of the Divine; it is a unity which creates love, a unity in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one. As Saint Paul says: 'He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him' (1 Cor 6:17) [DCE, 10].

“God's relation to man and man's relation to God”: it is really, then, a mutual search. While it is true that God searches for man, it is also true that man searches for God. Deep down, each one of us yearns for God. It is reminiscent of the painful longing of lovers who are separated. We are separated from God in this world. For the one who truly loves God, that one feels the pain of this distance from Him. We saw that, for example, in the revelations of the intense pain which Mother felt when her personal writings were made public.

What are we to do about this while we are here in this world? Yes, He is with us

here in this world, but the spiritual closeness that is communion with Him – the two becoming one, that mystery of nuptial union in which the two become truly one yet remain themselves – that still eludes us as long as we are here in this world. What, then, are we to do?

Clearly passivity is not the answer! We can look to what the Lord recommends for us to do in the Gospel: to keep our lamps lit brightly. What does that mean, though, to “keep our lamps lit brightly”?

The Charism of Charity

Right after this passage from the Gospel of St. Matthew which we just heard proclaimed – where our Lord gives us this teaching within the context of the parable of the ten virgins, five wise and five foolish – a little bit later on in this same chapter he teaches us about the final judgement, with that great allegorical scene of the division between the sheep and the goats, the sheep on the king’s right, the goats on the king’s left. The sheep on his right were welcomed into his kingdom with the king telling them, “Whatever you did to the least of my brethren, that you did to me.”

It is all based on charity, charity in which we recognize Jesus in the poor. Is that not what Mother taught us with her whole life? How she would speak about the different disguises that Jesus wears as he tries to enter into our life. If we look away from the poor, then we lose sight of the One we truly love and when we do that, love dries up and the longing for the lover vanishes. As a result, we become incapable of true happiness. As believers, our love for God while we are in this world is to be characterized by the old saying that “distance makes the heart grow fonder,” and not, “out of sight out of mind.” We need the wisdom of God to recognize this, the wisdom of God which, St. Paul tells us in our second reading from First Corinthians, is foolishness to man.

My dear sisters, you have a unique charism, to care for those who are most cast off from society – as Pope Francis would put it, those farthest away not just geographically but also existentially. You go to the furthest margins of society in both senses. Yet, so often I’ve heard stories about people who would have an opportunity to visit with Mother and ask her what they could do to serve the poor. She would always direct them back home, back to where they came from, telling them that there are many poor around them where they live and they should serve the poor there, at home.

It’s also an old adage – and one that we should all live by – that charity begins at home. That most especially applies to those living in religious community. Perhaps at times that is the greatest challenge of all, the challenge of charity at home. Maybe it is there that Jesus takes the greatest, most clever disguises. You know what I’m talking about better than I do! There is where one can truly live the call of freely choosing to lower oneself about which St. Paul speaks in First Corinthians, the choice of self-abasement: to bring oneself low so that we might be found among those whom God chooses and uses to shame the worldly wise. This is the great divine paradox, that it is

the lowly and despised of this world through whom God chooses to work His strength, a divine paradox that is ultimately summed up in His beloved Son, for, as St. Paul says, Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Conclusion

Dear Sisters Ana Lourdes, Juana Rose, Lilia Rose, Lucia Savina and Rose Isela: in making your profession of first vows today, you are making this choice, the choice to abase yourselves with Christ on the Cross, that you might quench his thirst for souls by the power of God working through you. Today you consecrate yourselves to charity: the living out of this consecration – outside of your home and, especially within – is, in the vision of the psalmist with whom prayed in the Responsorial Psalm, the embroidered apparel with which you are borne to your king, the raiment threaded with spun gold upon you, befitting the king's daughter when brought into the palace of the one whom she loves and to whom she gives her whole life. The adornment of your charity is the wedding gown that bespeaks your worthiness for your beloved, so that, with your lamps lit brightly, you are ready to go out and meet the bridegroom, Christ the Lord.