

PRIESTS' PRAYER SERVICE  
NATIONAL BLACK CATHOLIC CONGRESS

## **“Give me Jesus”**

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**Text: 2 Corinthians 5:17-20** *“If someone is in Christ, they are a new creation. What is old has passed away – look the new has come! Everything comes from God, who through Christ, reconciled us to himself, and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, that God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning their transgressions against them, and putting his message of reconciliation in us. So we are Christ’s ambassadors: (imagine) that God is pleading to the world through us.”*

Dear Brothers and Fellow Ambassadors of Jesus Christ:

We all need to be grateful to Valerie Washington and to all the organizers of the congress for carving out this time in our busy agenda to place ourselves in prayer before the Lord. When Pope John Paul II wrote to the whole church at the beginning of the third millennium, he empathized that all pastoral planning, just what we are doing here, must come out of an atmosphere of prayer.

And today, most of the vocations which make up the body of Christ (bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, lay women and laymen, and, especially, our young people) are invited to pray together so that the Lord, through the Holy Spirit, will enlighten us on our way, and give us the courage to continue our pilgrimage in this pilgrim church.

As priests, you and are invited to reflect on the particular calling which has been formed in us by the Holy Spirit and confirmed publicly by the Church. How important it is for us to return quietly, honestly and courageously to our spiritual roots.

We begin our reflection with utmost humility, recalling that there were many persons, women and men, that Jesus encountered in the gospels who were more intelligent, more generous, more courageous, more gifted, better leaders and even holier than were the apostles. And yet, for his own reasons, Jesus chose those twelve with only one thing in mind: he wanted them to be “with him.” Brothers, you and I are the heirs to that invitation; and we need to acknowledge that even though we ourselves are “beset with weakness”, nevertheless, Jesus has called us to be “with him” in a particularly intimate way.

I hope that our retreat today will help us to focus on our vocation as ambassadors of Christ, as those who have been anointed as both heralds and vessels of the gospel of Jesus Christ. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon **me**. The Lord has anointed **me**. He has sent **me** to bring good news.”

Our vocation as an ambassador means that we are to represent the interests of the one who sends us, that we speak words and do deeds that reflect his vision and his values, and that we need to be in such regular contact with the one who sends to ensure that we are communicating his message and not our own.

A good ambassador, very importantly, is capable of reading the signs of the times in order to adapt the sender’s principles to local and present circumstances.

Let our reflection this morning concentrate on Jesus’ message, on the circumstances in which we find ourselves and our faith today, and on how we can bring Jesus’ message more authentically into the world to which we have been sent.

Brothers, it has to be Jesus we preach and we will never be able to give to others what we do not ourselves have. Above all, our lives as ministers of the gospel mean that we have to have Jesus.

Let us spend a few moments, then, recalling how Jesus trained his ambassadors and his followers, what he told them about his values and his message. In Matthew, chapter 5, Jesus, as the new Moses, speaking as Emmanuel, God’s human face, instructs us as well, beginning the of God pleading to the world through us.

We remember how it begins:

Congratulations to the poor in spirit – theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Congratulations to those who are mourning – they shall be consoled.  
Congratulations to the gentle – they shall inherit the earth.  
Congratulations to those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness – they shall be satisfied.  
Congratulations to those who are merciful – they shall receive mercy.  
Congratulations to the pure in heart – they shall see God.  
Congratulations to those who create peace – they shall be called children of God.  
Congratulations to those who are persecuted because of righteousness – theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Congratulations to you when they reproach you and persecute and falsely talk all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because your reward in heaven is huge. You see, that's how they persecuted the prophets before you.

That is the portrait of the authentic ambassador, the faithful follower of Jesus. Those are to be our words, those values are to characterize everything we say and everything we do.

Near the end of the chapter, Jesus enunciates two ways his disciples are to announce and to embody a new and a better righteousness. He says: "You've heard it said: 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I am telling you: don't resist the evil person. No – whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek to them also; and whoever wants to take you to court and take your tunic, let them have your garment as well. And whoever forces you to walk one Roman mile, go two miles with them. Give to the person who asks you, and don't turn away the person who wants to borrow from you."

And then he says: "You have heard that it was said: 'You will love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I'm telling you: Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become children of your Father in heaven, because He makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust. You see – if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't tax collectors do the same? And if you only greet your brothers and sisters, what extra are you doing? Don't the Gentiles do the same? You are therefore to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.'"

These are such beautiful words; but perhaps our distance from them in time and attention has diminished their power. If we look at the historical context in which these words were spoken, we will realize that the centuries have softened the bite Jesus intended them to have and the shock the disciples and the crowd must have felt upon hearing them. The sermon on the Mount takes place against a background of resistance, violence and chaos. The Jews were slaves in their own land, they had been disenfranchised by a ruthless occupying power and reduced to resentful and unwilling submission.

So this strong and authoritative instruction on mercy to enemies that Jesus gives to his ambassadors and to the crowd not only startled them, it probably also confused, and maybe even infuriated them.

This message seems impossible to obey and to embody today; and yet, we have all seen a most powerful example of it very recently, and it did not come from our Catholic community. It came from the Mother Emanuel AME Church community in Charleston, when they forgave the young man who perpetrated that hateful, monstrous and useless tragedy upon them as they were praying.

This act of fidelity to the gospel was so confusing to most of us that this extraordinary and heroic gesture of mercy was not widely reported in the media, partly because of our culture's penchant for sensationalizing violence and chaos. We, today, are fairly good at showing our solidarity, our moral outrage and our righteous anger, both in word and deed; but our commitment to the radicality of the gospel is less often discernible. But the other reason for the silence that accompanied the Mother Emanuel grace was that this deed was so bewildering that it became unbelievable.

We ambassadors are called to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect, and, as Pope Francis continues to bring to our attention: the perfection of God is His mercy.

God's mercy is absolute. As Pope Francis wrote in his announcement of the Year of Mercy: "We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends upon it.....Mercy is the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy is the fundamental law that dwells in every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy is the bridge that connects God

and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.”

In that lovely and hopeful letter to the church, the Holy Father explained that God’s mercy has two faces: mercy we receive from God and mercy we extend to one another. He then illustrated his point by using the two most beautiful and most beloved parables in the gospels, both from Luke: the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke records that the loving Father accepts both his ungrateful sons, the selfish one and the self-righteous one, with the same generous and unconditional love, emphasizing that it is as impossible for any of us to lose the love of God as it is for us to try to earn it. When Jesus died on the cross, he died for you, he died for me, he died for everybody. Everybody, everywhere, every tribe, every nation, every language, every people group. Because everybody’s sins are on the cross with Jesus, forgiveness and mercy are for everybody. In the Christian worldview, in the Christian narrative, heaven is full of forgiven sinners. Hell is full of forgiven sinners. Heaven or hell is the result of how we live our lives; and how we live our lives has everything to do with how we extend mercy to others, to all others without exception: mercy always, everywhere, in every situation, no matter what.

With respect to mercy’s second face, Luke records that a religious expert “stood up to test Jesus” with a question. What must he do to inherit eternal life? This wasn’t an honest question; he wanted to trap Jesus. When Jesus asks him what the Scriptures say, the expert quotes from memory the two passages from the Torah that cover this very question. His answer was exactly right: “Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” His answer is a scary reminder that being religiously correct is a far cry from sowing mercy. KNOWING the good isn’t good enough without DOING the good. If you want to truly love, if you want to inherit eternal life, says Jesus, show mercy to your neighbor.

But then the expert in the law deflects Jesus’ response. Luke says the man wanted to “justify himself.” He asks: “And who is my neighbor?” He tries to limit his responsibility, just as we often try to do, by defining who is and who is not our neighbor.

To answer him, Jesus tells the audience the story of the Good Samaritan. In that historical context, Jews and Samaritans would have considered each other implacable enemies, not as neighbors. A priest and a Levite ignore one of their own Jewish brothers lying half-dead in a ditch, the victim of robbers. A Samaritan, however, stops to aid the man and continues to go out of his way to assist take care of him. At the end of the story, Jesus flips the expert's question by changing it from "Who **is** my neighbor" to "Who **ACTED** like a neighbor? Once again, the expert knows the right answer: "the one who had mercy." But the story ends here and we never learn whether this man actually moved from **BEING** right to **DOING** right. In Dr. King's commentary on the parable, he put it this way: "The priest and the Levite ask: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But then the Good Samaritan came by and asked himself: "If I **don't** stop to help this man, what will happen to **HIM**?"

And Jesus concludes the lesson as he says to his listeners, and to us as his ambassadors: "Go and **DO** likewise." Go and do likewise.

The signs of the times tell us how difficult doing likewise can be.

Isn't it true, brothers, that today that we confront a kind of universal obstinacy, a spiritual hardness of heart that causes us to reject both the mercy that God wants to extend to us individually and the mercy he commands us to extend to one another, even to our enemies.

It seems to me that the deadliest sin of our day is the sin of certainty: the unalterable conviction that I, or my side, or my tribe, or my political party – we are the ones who are right, and everybody else is wrong.

Certainty is the great enemy of unity; it is the biggest obstacle to true tolerance. Certainty makes real dialogue impossible, and certainty makes faith unnecessary and superfluous. Real faith always leaves room for doubt and for hope. Faith moves us from a world in which everything is inevitable to a world in which anything is possible; faith moves us out of a paradigm of living from "I'll believe it when I see it" to one of "I'll see it when I believe it."

Why would we need faith if we have left no room to question our own assumptions or our own motives or our own prejudices?

The poisonous fruits of the sin of certainty are evident in our world: we are effectively living in a stalemate; we are playing a zero-sum game. We seem content with a lazy ideological sterility that paralyzes cultural discourse to the extent that we have are satisfied with living with in pervasive frustration and anger, automatically demonizing “the other”, even resorting to violence and other futile methods of asserting power. Instead of building bridges, we find ourselves digging ever-deeper bunkers. We may be tempted to want to empower the oppressed, not so that they can become free but so that they can become oppressors themselves. We may be tempted to put inflammatory rhetoric onto vengeance so that we can then call it justice.

This cannot be what God has in mind for his people. Where, in this miasma, is the gospel? How, in the silos and echo chambers in our nation and in our Church can the gospel of Jesus Christ be heard? How does any light penetrate and dispel this deep and dazzling darkness?

Praise be to God for this wisdom of our African American fathers and mothers who ingrained this axiom into us: God always makes a way out of no way. God always makes a way out of no way. Even when there is so much darkness, God always makes a way.

God has done some of his best work, has achieved some of his most compelling accomplishments in the darkness. The Israelites fled Egypt in the darkness, they crossed the Red Sea in the darkness. The Lord Jesus, God’s human face, was born in the darkness of night. Jesus gave us the Eucharist and the priesthood in the darkness of the Last Supper, he died on the cross when the gospel says: “darkness covered the earth.” He lay in the darkness of the tomb. On the third day, He rose again in the darkness, and his tomb was discovered empty “very early in the morning, while it was still dark.”

Yes, God always makes a way out of no way, always, everywhere, in every situation, no matter what. Even though we may not know what he is doing, he is doing something. God is always at work, always being about his relentless rescue mission, always “gathering the nations,” always recasting the disaster of Babel and turning it into the triumph of Pentecost.

What, then, might we do to continue to smooth the way for the coming of God.

We need to present ourselves as being beyond ideology, we need to be both post-liberal and post-conservative. After the manner of Jesus, we need to transcend boundaries of intellectual and social comfort. We cannot let those to whom we preach, in both word and deed, reduce us to defaults. And we need to preach the gospel in its entirety, not just selecting the parts which support our personal narrative. We should never refuse an opportunity to listen to another and always be open to dialogue. Refusal to be reconciled is the sin against the Holy Spirit.

We need to lead without being elitist, to present ourselves as one in with whom everyone feels valued and accepted by being able to express empathy to anyone, to anyone without exception. For ambassadors of Christ, there is no “basket of deplorables.”

We need to be activist and prayerful simultaneously. We need to be intentional about not feeding the accusation that the just aren't pious and that the pious aren't just. Both the commitment to justice and the obedience to the command to pray always are constitutive of the followers and, particularly, of his ambassadors.

We need to live lives of continual discernment in order to navigate these times characterized by ambiguity and tension. Just as Mary pondered over and over again the mystery of God within herself, let us not rush ahead of grace but continue to discern the path God is calling us to pursue.

And lastly, each of us needs to continue to pay attention to the thousand ways we sort and rank, the ways we assign goodness and privilege, the hierarchies we dream into being. We need to remind ourselves that at God's table, royalty and outcast sit side by side and are indistinguishable from one another.

As ambassadors for Christ, we need always emphasize that the gospel is best and most authentically preached not just in words but in deeds. As DeWitt Jones reminds us: “There's no use walking somewhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.”

Which teaching is more powerful? Is it when Jesus says “You know how the Gentiles lord it over others and the great make their authority felt? That's not it

should be among you.” Or is it when he rises from supper and washes the feet of his disciples?

Which teaching is stronger, when Jesus ends his instruction to his disciples by telling them they have to love their enemies, or when he prays for his enemies, with his dying breath: “Father, forgive them.”

Ultimately, the gospel we preach and live is not simply an ideology, not simply a worldview. As Pope Benedict reminded us often, the gospel is a person: Jesus Christ, and being an ambassador for Christ means being united with him in a way that is both intimate and mystical.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John’s gospel, on the day He was raised from the dead, Jesus appeared to His ambassadors, coming to them **at night** into a locked room. John describes in detail the action of Jesus. He says that “Jesus breathed on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven and whose sins you retain are retained.’” Too many readers of the gospel equate what Jesus says and does in that moment as empowering the apostles to forgive sins in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Another way to interpret this event is that Jesus is saying this, not just to the eleven disciples, but to every believer down through the centuries from that Easter night to right now. He is saying: “If you want to experience the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in your lives and in the world, you must forgive sins, you must exercise mercy for all. When you forgive sins, they are forgiven. When you withhold forgiveness, the destructive, corrosive power of sin remains – in your life, and in the world. The key to the experiencing the joy and the freedom of the gospel, the key to reconciliation in the world and for the world is whether we can forgive sin, whether you and I can render the deeds of mercy by forgiving sin.

So we, as priests and as ambassadors, we need to be in Christ. Mercy is not only our mission; it is our very identity.

Because if we are in Christ, we are a new creation. What is old has passed away – look the new has come. Everything comes from God, who, through Christ, reconciled us to himself, and who gave us this ministry of reconciliation, not reckoning their transgressions against them, and putting his message of

reconciliation in us. So, we are Christ's ambassadors: God pleading with the world through us.

Let others insist on being right, give us Jesus

Let others hold grudges and foster division, give us Jesus

Let others try to build a Church of Christ without Christ, give us Jesus.

Amen