

HOMILY: OPENING MASS OF XVI GENERAL SYNOD

Rome, 11 Septembre 2022



The Gospel today begins with these words: “Tax collectors and sinners (bad people who disregarded God and God’s laws) were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes (who judged themselves to be good, righteous people) began to complain, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” So, on one side we have the outcasts, the ungodly, all wanting to be close to Jesus and to listen to him. On the other side, watching from a distance and complaining about Jesus’ behavior are the pillars of the institution: the scribes and Pharisees. And in their midst is Jesus who seeks to encourage unity, solidarity, inclusion, hospitality, and community because for him every person, every life is precious and loved unconditionally.

Today we don’t single out tax collectors, nor do we use the label ‘sinners’ very much. We don’t have scribes and Pharisees, even if we have traditionalists and progressives, conservatives and liberals. But the same divisions, prejudice, inequalities, marginalization remains alive and well in our society and even in our church. There are those who belong and those who don’t; there are those who are given attention and those who are ignored; those who are welcomed and those who are snubbed; those who are treated as the elite and important, and those who are pushed to remain on the fringes. Often the pillars of our society, of our institutions and of our church

prefer to leave things this way, lest it disturbs their comfort and power imbalance. But Jesus shows us that this is not his way, and certainly not the way of God, which is to recognize and affirm the dignity of every human person and the gift of all life.

Three weeks ago, on 20 August, a car bomb exploded in Moscow killing 29-year-old Darya Dugina – the daughter of Alexander Dugin, the ultra-nationalist Russian philosopher referred to as Putin’s “spiritual guide” and “Putin’s Brain”. At this terrible and sad event, Pope Francis sent a message of condolence which sparked a lot of resentment and unhappiness from some quarters, so much so that the Vatican had to issue an explanation about the Pope’s action, which said that the Holy Father’s words of condolence should be seen as a voice raised in defense of human life and the values attached to it.

A couple of weeks later, a gunman pointed a loaded gun at the face of the Vice President of Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and fired, but “miraculously” it did not detonate. On that shocking occasion, again Pope Francis sent a message to the Vice President herself expressing “my solidarity and closeness at this delicate time”. Apparently, Cristina de Kirchner did not enjoy good relations with Francis when he was Archbishop in Buenos Aires, and she is

currently facing corruption charges. So, why would Pope Francis even bother to show such concern for her welfare?

Can we see a similarity here between the actions of Jesus and the responses of Pope Francis?

To those who complained, Jesus went on to make his point by addressing the three well-known parables of: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Prodigal Son or (as some refer to) The Merciful Father. And I want to reflect on these from God’s perspective – not what they say about God, but how does God see us. It is clear from these parables that the message or teaching is that God’s option or concern is for those who are lost; God is on the side of the so-called ‘bad’ people: those who are struggling, those who are suffering, those who are caught in a bind by the choice of their actions.

The message of Jesus in these parables (which Pope Francis embodies) is that every single life is precious to God and God will do everything possible to save that life from being lost or destroyed. Every life is a “pearl of great price” for which no effort is spared in acquiring it. For God, there are no bad people, even though their actions may be considered as bad or evil. God loves every sinner, but not the sin. For God,

every person and all of creation is good, as we believe from the moment of creation: God saw all that God made and found it very good! God does not give up on anyone because of the introduction of original sin; God remembers only the original blessing...and there is always hope in God for everyone to be renewed in that blessing.

The Indian Jesuit Fr. Anthony De Mello said: “Be grateful for your sins; they are carriers of God’s grace.” I love this saying because it is in the recognition of our sinfulness and being at a distance from God, that the opportunity opens for renewal and to receive God’s life. St. Paul knew this experience, as he pronounces with conviction in today’s second reading: “This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost.” There comes a point in time for all of us when we “come to our senses” (when that light suddenly is switched on) and we see that living or acting in a certain way is not life-giving as we might have thought.

At that moment when we are humbled and at our lowest, we can only look up. And we see that God’s hand is reaching down, beckoning us to stand up. God cannot leave us lost and alone and frightened. God pursues us until God finds us and brings us home...and God celebrates! We are precious and loved; we are life created in God’s image and likeness.

We who are gathered here for the General Synod are the leaders of the Congregation in the General Council, the Provinces and Vice Provinces. In our ministry from day-to-day, we experience many joys, but also some challenges and sorrows in dealing with our brothers who can be troublesome.

And it is easy for us to develop negative feelings and strained relationships towards them. But our gathering is a reminder that we are committed to live life by the gift of our charism: the 'memoria passionis' which unites us in a common mission: to keep alive the memory of the Passion of Jesus as a statement of God's love for all of creation which God desires is not lost but found and celebrated.

Like for Pope Francis, our charism which is at the heart of the Passion of Jesus, gives voice to the preciousness of every created life, even when there is opposition and difficulties. Our Passionist mission is to proclaim in word and deed the Gospel of the Passion, the Good News of God's suffering-love, by seeking out the lost, the abandoned, the struggling, the sinners, the marginalized, the cast-aways, and uniting them in community.

May our experience of this Synod renew us in our mission as Passionists. May it inflame our sense of gratitude for the gift of our charism which assures us that we are all unconditionally loved by God. May it give us courage to adopt a prophetic stance by giving voice and acting in the defense of all created life. And may it strengthen our hope in God's abiding love and presence as we go forward. +

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