

Archbishop's Annual Appeal Homily: "In His Presence"
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B), January 27 & 28, 2024

My Dear Friends in Christ,

Peace and All Good!

I cherish this moment to speak with you on matters of the heart.

In the weeks leading up to this time together, I find myself often in the chapel, in the company of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, so that his heart speaks to mine.

In His Presence is where we all find joy and peace, as well as comfort and consolation. And so, it seems appropriate that the theme for this year's Annual Appeal is "*In His Presence*."

In the Holy Eucharist, the heart of Christ is poured out for us in the greatest act of love that this world has ever known. How often we find ourselves *in his presence* for a "heart to heart" encounter in which we share our joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, not always in equal measure.

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The great English convert and scholar of the nineteenth century, St. John Henry Cardinal Newman chose "heart speaks unto heart" as the motto to go on his coat of arms when he became a cardinal in 1879. That motto inspired Cardinal Newman to compose a prayer called, *Radiating Christ*, which in part reads:

Dear Jesus, help me to spread Your fragrance wherever I go.
Flood my soul with Your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly, that my life may only be a radiance of Yours.
Shine through me, and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me, but only Jesus!

This prayer reveals the heart of a person who is deeply in love with Jesus and who is passionate about wanting to share the reality of this love with others. In the same way, we spread the fragrance of Christ everywhere we go, when we carry within our hearts God's loving and merciful presence. Our world so desperately needs to see God shining through us because he is the source of our joy.

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Today's Gospel begins with Jesus teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath. St. Mark tells us that as the people listened to Jesus, they were astonished as Jesus taught with such authority, unlike the scribes. Scribes never expressed their own judgment or opinion but cited the great masters of the past to support whatever they would say. Also, scribes focused on the external observances of the Law rather than its spirit. And so, their teaching failed to make an impression on people because it lacked personal conviction, being grounded in experience. They did not practice what they preached.

On the other hand, Jesus' words had the power to move people's hearts because his words were drawn from his own experiences with God's holy people. He spoke with his own voice and his own authority. Jesus revealed the truth of God's love. His heart overflowed with love for the sick and the

abandoned, the poor and the outcast. People experienced God's mercy and compassion in his every deed and action.

Unlike the scribes, who used their authority to keep people in line, Jesus's authority freed people from their burdens because they were *in his presence*. They knew they were precious in God's eyes.

What brought the man with the unclean spirit to the synagogue on that Sabbath Day? Perhaps he had been there before listening to the scribes and praying that one day he would witness a prophet like Moses. Or it may have been curiosity that brought him to the synagogue on that particular day. Whatever the reason, nothing prepared him or those present with him for what unfolded. *In His Presence*, the demon cried out: "What do you want of us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!" At which, Jesus rebuked him, "Quiet! Come out of him!" With a simple

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word of authority, the man is delivered of the demon that had held him bound. The people were rightly amazed, not only by his preaching but also by the fact that even demons obeyed him.

With this miracle, the Messianic Age had arrived. Jesus would fulfill the hopes of Israel's faith by showing himself triumphant over all the forces of evil. The power that moves Jesus is the spirit of the living God, and he uses his authority to free people from the evil that rules their lives. He made them feel precious in God's sight. Jesus entered into the lives of people. He encountered them where they were, and he accompanied them on their journey. He shared people's disappointments, healed their wounds, and treated them as friends. At the same time, he challenged them in the depths of their being and encouraged them to lead good lives. The miracles of Jesus attracted attention, as they would today. However, it was his commitment to his Father in his teaching that transformed their hearts. Jesus' authority

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sprang from the conviction about the love of the Father for us. The authority and credibility of the word of Jesus over two thousand years is evidenced in that his word continues to speak to our hearts and the hearts of untold numbers of people. It is the word that gives life.

As Jesus called his disciples to be with him as he began his mission at Capernaum, he now calls each of us to be with him as he continues his mission in the places where we live.

Like the disciples, we know that we must spend time *in his presence*, to allow his heart to speak to ours. We seek to imitate him. And so, we enter into his presence so that he can teach us the way. Having been nourished by the Lord in the Eucharist and fortified by the sacraments, we go out into the world as his witnesses.

Pope St. Paul VI wrote: "People in our time listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to

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teachers, it is because they are witnesses." As disciples of Jesus, we share in his authority by our baptism and we are called to be his witnesses in the midst of the world, to spread his fragrance everywhere we go.

How beautifully this is done in so many different ways in this local church. Parents teach their children the faith, both by word and by deed. The elderly pass on the wisdom of the ages to younger generations. The compassion and mercy of so many of our charitable institutions, that are shown to the poor and the outcast, the sick and the burdened. The word of truth that is preached in our churches and taught in our schools. How grateful I am that the words of Cardinal Newman are lived out in this local church! How blessed we are in your parish community with an abundance of teachers and witnesses!

As you prayerfully consider supporting this year's Archbishop's Annual Appeal, ask the Holy Spirit for guidance on

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how each one of us can transmit the fragrance of Jesus and the light of Christ.

My own spiritual father, St. Francis of Assisi once said;
"Preach the Gospel and when necessary, use words!"

I want to thank you my dear friends for the many ways in which you preach the Gospel each and every day by your lives of love and sacrifice. You draw your strength and your courage from the Eucharist which you receive and in whose loving presence you look and pray.

May the Lord grant you his peace!