

Diocesan New Evangelization Catechetical Conference

“Missionaries in the New Evangelization”

October 24, 2015 9:00 a.m. Expo Center

Saturday, 29th Week in Ordinary Time (*Rom.8:1-11; Lk.13:1-9*)

What a great joy it is to join with you for this special conference, and for the great blessing of beginning together with the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. How providential that we gather on this memorial feast of a great Missionary Bishop, St. Anthony Claret, who came from Spain to Cuba in the late 1800's to evangelize and to help strengthen the Catholic faith in that country so near to our own. He was also the founder of a religious community that have come to be known as the Claretians.

We gather this morning as deacon, religious and members of our lay faithful from all over the Diocese to spend this day reflecting on the New Evangelization and how each of us is called to be “Missionaries in the New Evangelization.”

We are catechists, teachers and lay ecclesial ministers. We are volunteers who give our time and we are paid professionals who are involved in many of the ministries of the Church. We are involved in parish programs, our Catholic schools and part of the Diocesan Pastoral staff.

Thank you for taking the time to be here today. I realize it's a great sacrifice as you give up your Saturday, when you could be catching up on all the chores waiting for you around your homes, or just having a day of relaxing or watching college football. But clearly you are here because you are devoted to our Catholic faith and because you are responding to that “Call of the Lord” to reach out in loving service and to participate in the Church's mission.

As you probably know, I just had the pleasure of spending Monday through Thursday of this past week together with most of our priests, along with Bishop Raica and the priests of the Diocese of Gaylord, for our annual multi-day convocation. Archbishop Bernie Hebda, the former Bishop of Gaylord, and currently the Coadjutor Archbishop of Newark and also the recently appointed Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Minneapolis/St. Paul, was our presenter. He led us in reflections on the “Priest: An Instrument of God's Mercy” in anticipation of the beginning of the Jubilee Year of Mercy which Pope Francis has called the

entire Church to enter into beginning on December 8th, just six weeks or so from now. We reflected on our responsibilities to you, how best we can provide pastoral care given the circumstances of our day and time. But we also spoke about you---our brothers and sisters in the faith---and how we are called to collaborate together in the mission in which we all share through our baptism into Christ.

Today's Scripture Readings for this Saturday of the 29th Week in Ordinary Time are so appropriate for our gathering, and they take us back to the foundational choices that each of us has to make, and keep on making, every day of our spiritual journey throughout our lives.

St. Paul puts the "choice" in terms of "Life in the Flesh" and "Life in the Spirit".

Earlier this week, we heard Paul reflecting on whether we choose to be a "slave to sin" or a "slave to God", and he reminded us that the wages, the payoff, the end result of "sin" is death; whereas the wages, payoff, result of living our life in God's service is Eternal Life.

And so Paul's reflection here today about "life in the flesh" or "life in the Spirit" is another way of framing the question: do we choose to follow God and God's ways in our lives? If not, then death. But if so, then we have life in Christ!!!

It is that life in Christ that leads us to be able to live in true freedom, and to live our faith with joy!

And that is what motivates us---and in fact should compel us----to be what Pope Francis calls "Missionary Disciples"---and what today's conference theme addresses.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus is asked about suffering and catastrophes, and whether or not they are the "payoff"---the consequence of sin? Isn't that still our human tendency? To see that when bad things happen to us that must mean that God is punishing me?

Jesus is very clear in saying that is not the correct conclusion to draw. In fact, Jesus is the answer to suffering. When we unite ourselves to Christ, our suffering is transformed; we are redeemed through His suffering. And that is how we can say that our "suffering is redemptive"; when we are joined to Christ's suffering, our suffering has a purpose----and it can bring us to a deeper life in Christ.

But notice that even though Jesus dispels the false notion that God causes, or punishes us through suffering, He immediately focuses our attention on repentance!

Sin definitely has a consequence, as Paul reminded us, and as Jesus taught us so clearly. And we have to root sin out of our lives; that's our constant, daily challenge.

And so Jesus uses the parable of the fig tree to remind us of that. A tree is supposed to bear fruit. If it doesn't, then we do what needs to be done: cultivate it, prune it, fertilize and water it. The owner ran out of patience and said: "Cut it down!" The gardener wanted to give it more time, another year, another chance.

God is the God of unending chances. He is always willing to forgive. But, we are mortal human beings, and eventually, we run out of time. That's why we need to repent, and make our repentance be effective.

We need to make the "tree of our lives" bear fruit. And because we have the Spirit of God living within us, our fruit will be the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control and chastity.

When we live our lives knowing that we have been freed from the power of sin and death through Christ, when we recognize that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit Who, through His Gifts, enables our lives to bear the fruits of that same Spirit, then our lives should be radiating the joy of the Gospel.

And that is first and foremost how we can be Missionary Disciples.

As Pope Francis wrote so beautifully in *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel): "Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey." (#127)

Pope Francis also tells us that as Missionary Disciples, we are constantly aware of the "Kerygma," which is the essential summary message of the Gospel, which Pope Francis summarizes as: "Jesus Christ loves you; He gave His life to save you; and now He is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you." (#164)

That's the message that gives us comfort and peace, even in the midst of whatever sufferings or catastrophes that we might encounter or endure. That's also the message that we should be ready, willing and anxious to share with any and all we meet. As Pope Francis writes further: "Rather than being dour judges bent on rooting out every threat and

deviation, we should appear as joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shine forth in a life of fidelity of the Gospel.” (#168)

The world is in great need of the witness that we are able to give---the Good News of faith that we are already living. We must find a way to be those “missionary disciples” that only each of us can be. As we heard so beautifully in today’s psalm refrain: “*Lord, this is the people that longs to see your face.*” What a great descriptive word----“longs”!!! And if we don’t help people to see the Face of God, that is a failed opportunity on our part.

During today’s conference, perhaps we can allow ourselves to be pruned, cultivated, fertilized, watered and encouraged so that we can not just bear fruit for ourselves, but to allow us to be the Light of Christ to shine to all the world.

God bless you, now and always!