

September 27, 2021

6:00 p.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Celebrating Workers of Mercy/St. Vincent de Paul, Priest (1581-1660)

(Is. 58:6-11; Mt. 25:31-46)

This is one of those Gospel Readings that we all love, and yet one that probably never fails to make us feel a bit uncomfortable. It's one of those Gospels that is so clear; we can't possibly say to Jesus: "What do you mean?" It's also one of those Gospel Readings that makes us wonder: which group does Jesus see me as a part of? For those of you on my right, are YOU the "sheep"---the "Blessed of my Father", and are you on my left, the "goats"? Or is it as you are looking at the altar, which would mean that you (on my left) are the ones among the "sheep", and you then become those among the "goats". It feels awful to think that we'd be counted among the "goats"; but how relieved---blessed---fortunate it feels if we'd be counted among the "sheep". But, of course, as we all know, that's not determined by where we are sitting in the Cathedral; it's not determined by any other standard, other than: did I give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, comfort to the sick, and a loving visit to those in prison?? In other words, have I cared about others?

But there's an even more important question: Why did I care about others? Was it out of a humanitarian concern? If so, that's good. But if it was because we saw in each of those hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, sick and imprisoned people the Face of Jesus??---Well, that makes what we did worthy of the invitation we heard Jesus just extend: *"Come you who have my Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world."*

And what about those who hear those words no one wants to hear: *"Out of my sight, you condemned, into that everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels"*? They not only did NOT see Jesus in those who were in need; they did not SEE them at all. The sin of "neglect", "indifference", spiritual blindness, in Jesus' "Book", brings condemnation and separation.

This evening, we celebrate all of us who, no matter on which side of the Cathedral you're sitting, are counted, in Jesus' Book, among the "Sheep", because you have chosen to "see" Jesus in those whom you are serving who are poor, needy,---the "little ones of this world".

The reason why Jesus taught the Beatitudes, and all the other particular aspects of His Sermon on the Mount, and most explicitly of all, the elements of what our Final Judgment will consist of as we heard so clearly in this evening's Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, is because of the basic principle and foundational Truth of God's Word: namely, that each and every human being is made in the image and likeness of God, and therefore, every person is owed great human dignity, and must be treated with love and respect.

So many of the Saints understood that basic Truth, and found the means to their own heroic holiness thru their love and service of those who were poor. The Saint the Church honors today, St. Vincent de Paul, was one of those great Saints.....Grew up in poverty, herding sheep; was a brilliant student and was ordained a priest at the age of 20; while on a trip on a ship, Turkish pirates captured the ship and he spent 4 years in slavery; was freed and became a parish priest who seemed at first to just want to have a normal, comfortable life. Then--he had a kind of minor conversion. One day, after visiting a very poor family, he preached about this family's needs, and there was such a great outpouring of food and other material goods for this family, that they had to find other people to share it with. That was the beginning of his new-found works of charity. He began to organize groups in every parish---Confraternities of Charity: care for the poor, nursing the sick, finding work for the unemployed. He helped to bring about renewal of his brother priests, helped to have better formation in the seminaries, instituted the Congregation of Priests of the Mission, and, along with St. Louise de Marillac, also founded the Congregation of the Daughters of Charity. He died on this date in 1660 as an old, but very happy, priest at the age of 80. Along with the help of Blessed Frederick Ozanam 200 years later, St. Vincent de Paul Societies were established in over 130 countries around the world, including here in our Diocese. St. Vincent de Paul is one of many Saints who have devoted their lives to the teachings and actions of Jesus, Who showed us the way to live out the most important and the greatest of all God's commands---Love of God and Neighbor.

I really look forward to this annual "Celebration of Workers of Charity and Mercy" every year because when we act with charity towards others and extend the gift of mercy, we are acting most like God. Love, Mercy and Justice are God's greatest attributes—they flow from God's very identity. And that's why, throughout all of Sacred Scripture, from the Book of Genesis to the Book of Revelation, God shows His constant concern for "the poor". And that is why we

list “the Preferential Option of the Poor” as one of the 7 hallmarks of Catholic Social Teaching. But what God’s Word reveals to us involves so much more than that “we should be nice to others” ----“we should write a check to a worthy cause every once in a while” ----or “we should occasionally volunteer at a food pantry or in a soup kitchen”.

This evening’s First Reading from the Prophet Isaiah was a powerful directive not only to do what we have come to know as the “Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy”, which pretty much flow from Jesus’ Parable of the Sheep and the Goats; but also to correct the injustices, the inequities, the acts of discrimination and oppression, that we know infect just about every aspect of our human lives. We should not only be “workers of charity and mercy”, but also we need to be advocates for justice according to God’s standards.

So, even more than “seeing” Jesus in the hungry, thirsty, needy, and imprisoned; we also need to act in ways that correct indifference, work for ways to welcome those who have been marginalized, and value those who have been ignored and forced into the peripheries.

You have come from so many different parts of our Diocese, and you are engaged in such a wide variety of services to the poor. You are Workers of Charity and Mercy by working in food pantries, jail ministry, migrant ministry, providing funeral lunches; you go to visit the sick and homebound, help to educate those in need, provide housing assistance, utility assistance, and those with medical needs. You show kindness and patience to those with mental and physical disabilities, provide employment assistance. Many of you support the poor in far distant parts of the world thru sister parishes, and sister Dioceses. And that’s only a partial list. But we gather this evening to give thanks to God for calling us to be His children, and for sending us His Son Jesus to help us to “see God in the Flesh”, and to come to know that all people are God’s sons and daughters, and therefore, brothers and sisters in Jesus.

This past year and a half has been very difficult for all of us, so much so that we were unable to celebrate this special Mass last year. But as we all know, as much as we were inconvenienced, and perhaps in serious ways, those who suffered the most during this pandemic are the ones who always suffer the most-- --the poor, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised members of our society. Here in our Diocese, and I’m sure in most Dioceses, even during the Pandemic, you “Workers of Charity and Mercy” continued your ministries to the best of your

abilities, and even found new and creative ways to overcome the obstacles that you were facing. For example in the Ministry to the Incarcerated..... Another powerful example was the way that Catholic Charities sprang into action from the very beginning of the Pandemic recognizing the need for supplemental ways to provide emergency food and supplies to those who might be falling through the cracks.

We have just entered into this special *“Jubilee Year of the Holy Spirit”*. It is my great hope that ALL of us will use these coming months as a time to pray that the Holy Spirit will help us to “see” Jesus in one another, especially the poor and the needy, and to “act” toward others with the Love, Mercy and Justice that are of God. I pray that this can be a time for our entire Diocese to be spiritually renewed in our Faith; that our hearts will be re-ignited with our Love for God and Neighbor; that we will be re-energized as Spirit-filled, joyful missionary disciples of Jesus, rooted in the Eucharist, and “on fire” with our Love for Jesus and one another.

That also means that each of us, besides being “Workers of Charity and Mercy”, need to take the time for more intense prayer asking the Holy Spirit to deepen our love for Jesus, and to renew our commitment to the Mission of the Church---to bring the Good News of Jesus to all the world; and that we can LIVE the Good News of Jesus effectively in our daily lives by being joyful witnesses of that Good News to all those we meet.

My dear Friends, we are here this evening not to pat ourselves on the back, but rather to give thanks to God for taking the initiative of showing us His Charity, His Mercy, and His Justice as unworthy as we are; and then, for inviting us to be His instruments of bringing that Love and Mercy to all those we meet. What a great privilege that is.

As Pope Francis reminds us so often: “The poor are not just objects of charity; rather they are our brothers and sisters in Christ.”

And as Jesus reminds us, it is the only way that we will be counted among the “Sheep” and hear those words we all long to hear: *“Come, you who have My Father’s Blessing---Inherit the Kingdome prepared for you from the creation of the world.”*