

Homily Opening of The General Chapter: Cardinal Pietro Parolin (4 November 2017)



«We were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children» (1 Thess 2, 7).

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Secular Franciscan Order, these words of Saint Paul, heard in the second reading, outline one of the most picturesque images to express the Gospel proclamation with that very solicitude typical of a mother who cares not only of the material good but also of the spiritual one of her children. God's Word, in fact, leads people to Christ and is the most necessary for growth in faith.

You too, according to your lay vocation within the Church, are committed to announcing and witnessing the Gospel, dedicating you to the apostolate in the form of fraternity inspired by the charism of Saint Francis. Therefore, the description of the Christian mission that the Apostle presents through the maternal image is also addressed to you.

There is a difference between this maternal image of the apostolate and that which emerges in the other two readings, marked by sharp and severe warnings. They are addressed to the priests of the Old Covenant, to the scribes, to the pharisees, but indicate the risks that are always lurking even in the lay apostolate.

«But you have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction » (Mal 2, 8). This word of the prophet Malachi underlines the great responsibility not only of the pastors, but also of those who are called to live in the world driven by the Holy Spirit to achieve the perfection of charity. The Lord today urges you to act in the world as a spark, filled with the Christian spirit, aware of having to walk generously in the life of sanctity, according to the model of life of the seraphic Poverello of Assisi. This perspective is an indispensable commitment especially to the leaders of the spiritual direction of your communities, who are themselves to be the first imbued with that Franciscan spirit, which is then the evangelical spirit that can watch the world with detachment.

No less severe are the words of Jesus for those who have sat in the chair of Moses, not as humble servants of the Word of God, but as avid seekers of the praise of men. In them, word and life appear in a big contrast: they are masters of things they do not observe, impose bills they dare not carry, claim a title - that of "rabbis" - which does not belong to them, because only one is the Master, Christ (cf. Mt 23: 10).

He, this evening, also tells us this warning: *«The greatest among you must be your servant» (Mt 23, 11).* These are words that encourage, each one in their own right, to live the Christian mission and witness as humble servants of the Church and servants of brothers. And we must be grateful to those we serve through our apostolate, because we can humbly serve Christ in them, remembering the teaching of the divine Master who says: *«Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.» (Mt 25, 40).*

The Word of God for today thus presents us, on one hand, the authentic model of the vocation and mission of the faithful disciple of Christ; on the other hand, his possible (moral) defects.

These references to the Gospel can be valuable indications for your intermediate General Chapter that opens today on the subject *“As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world” (Jn 17,18).* The work of these days will see you engaged in discerning the manners and ways best suited to live the secular Franciscan charism in today's social context. The goal to strive for it is a deep adherence to Christ! This is the indispensable basis of any community and apostolic perspective, as well as the guarantee of the effectiveness of every pastoral project. The deepening of the encounter with Jesus, the daily heart-to-heart conversation with Him in prayer, the precise reference to the evangelical instances in the light of the teaching of St. Francis's is the most fruitful ground to make your peculiar project of Christian life more concrete.

We need to have a deep conscience that we can not be "generators" of faith unless we have first "been generated" by the faith. Paul could announce Christ, also because he could say in all truth: *«yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me» (Gal 2, 20).* Therefore he could announce Christ, being first generated by Christ, being converted by Christ, permeated by Christ.

The lay apostolate is being set in practice in its intimate connection with the mystery of Christ; it is the duty not only of the priests, but of the whole Church, and therefore also of lay people, to make Jesus somehow "visible" in the human history. The faithful disciple of Christ must therefore be a person conquered, "grasped" by Christ (cf. *Phil 3:12*), for being witness in the world, being marked with the evangelical radicality.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I am pleased to be able to celebrate with you this Holy Mass at the beginning of the work at the chapter, which I offer to the Lord for you being perseverant. May He help you walk on the paths of holiness in order to become more and more the messengers of joy and hope, the instruments of peace.

May we be comforted by the words of Saint Charles of Borromeo, who's feast we celebrate today, which he told the priests of Milan in the last synod he celebrated: *"All of us are certainly weak, I admit it, but the Lord God provides us with such means that, if we wish, we can do a lot. Without them, however, you will not be able to believe in the commitment of your own vocation"*. We can also find in his words a particular reference to the Gospel of today, where he adds: *"Give always a good example and try to be the first in everything. Preach first of all with life and holiness, in order not to let happen that, because your conduct is in contradiction with your words you lose all credibility"*.

May the Immaculate Virgin help you: entrusting you to Her, you will really feel *"quiet and serene"* like *"children in the arms of the mother"* (cfr *Resp. ps.*). May She help you to dedicate yourself, with the ardor and humility of St. Francis, to build an always more fair, fraternal and solidary world.