

HOMILY FOR THE 23RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE LADIES OF CHARITY – USA
Kansas City, Missouri, 9 September 2017

Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

The readings for this 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time are most appropriate for today's celebration, the gathering of the Ladies of Charity of the United States in remembrance of the 400th anniversary of your foundation and the birth of the Vincentian Charism. Your coming to be flows from the compassionate action of the goodhearted laity of the town of Châtillon, who tenderly and overwhelmingly responded to the needs of a poor family, after having heard an impassionate sermon preached by their parish priest, Vincent de Paul.

The first line in two of today's readings struck me: those from the Prophet Ezekiel and the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans. God says to the prophet in a deliberate way, "I have appointed you as a watchman over my people" and Paul tells the community of believers in Rome, "the only thing you should give to anyone is love!"

"A watchman" or watcher, more properly stated, was one who, in ancient times, stood vigil over the city, carefully observing the daily life of its inhabitants, protecting them, and warning them of imminent dangers. He knew the people, their work, their habits, and their lifestyles. God uses this role to illustrate the job of the prophets as God's spokespersons. For example, in today's first reading, it's God's message that's delivered to the people, not Ezekiel's: a divine message delivered through a human instrument.

The watcher, we could say, is like "my brother's keeper." Recall the dialogue in Genesis between Cain and God. Cain asked God if he had been appointed his brother's keeper. The sense I wish to convey is that a part of the prophet's message was showing the people how to live and maintain their faith and human dignity. His goal was to help people know the loving mercy of God, encouraging them to turn back to God.

You, as Ladies of Charity, are the watchers, the keepers of your brothers and sisters whom the Lord has entrusted to you. As watchers, you need to know

intimately those you serve. You are called, in the spirit of Vincent de Paul, to draw near to those who live on the peripheries of society.

And, with encouragement from the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans, as Ladies of Charity, you continue to let the only thing that you give to the poor be love, by promoting their human dignity as daughters and sons of a living, loving God.

Your theme for this national assembly in honor of the 400th anniversary of your birth speaks eloquently of the courageous “yes” to all the Lord asked of you in order to usher in with haste the kingdom of God. Four hundred years tells us of your long-lasting fidelity in imitation of Mary’s yes to the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation. It is a decisive “yes” to the call for compassion and tenderness that Saint Vincent de Paul made to the laity, who formed the first of many Confraternities of Charity. Four hundred years ago, that call was made to a small group of townspeople in the parish of Châtillon.

Today that call to compassion and tenderness is answered by 150,000 volunteers in 53 countries throughout the world. What a wonderful sign you are of loving courage to those most deserving and desiring of knowing the compassionate mercy of God. Let your “yes” continue to resound wherever you are serving. And here in the USA, let that service reach the lives of those who feel estranged from our society. Help them feel your welcoming embrace as sisters and brothers. In the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 2, the author says, “remember always to welcome the stranger, for by doing this, some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”

In his message to the membership of AIC for its fourth centenary, Pope Francis called you to continue to be living witnesses of God’s mercy to the Poorest of the Poor, especially in reaching out and embracing women and children. Your inspiration is found in the tenderness and compassion of Saint Vincent de Paul to the marginalized of his day. You magnify the goodness of God to the suffering members of Christ’s body. Those who live in poverty represent for Vincent de Paul, and for all of us who have imbibed his charisma, the very person of Jesus Christ. They call us to a personal and communal conversion and an ever-deeper commitment of service.

Your service is rooted in the very mission of Jesus Christ to touch and transform the material, physical, moral, and spiritual brokenness of the Poor. In evangelizing them, you yourselves are evangelized. Your service is to be humble, gently

approaching those in need as your “Lords and Masters.” What a privilege it is to collaborate in God’s loving action in the world! Might those you evangelize and serve always perceive in each of you, individually and as an association, the all-encompassing love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our gospel today reminds us that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst.” As the Ladies of Charity of the United States, together with the entire International Association of Charities, may you continue to invoke the presence of our compassionate, welcoming Lord to the marginalized of our world.

G. Gregory Gay, CM