

Pope Francis and the Missionary Transformation of the Church and the Priesthood: Introduction

- Preface
 - It's a great joy to be here with you in Lake Charles as we enter into retreat together, when Jesus says to us what he said to the apostles after they had done and taught so much on one of their missions that they didn't have time even to eat, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while," and he took them on a boat with him away from the crowds. Well, the St. Charles Retreat Center isn't exactly one of Peter's fishing vessels, but it will do. Elsewhere Jesus would teach them and us how he seeks to give us the rest we need, telling us, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light." We find the rest and refreshment we need from yoking ourselves to Jesus, from responding to his invitation to unite ourselves more to him and learn from him on the inside his meekness and humility, so that no matter what challenges we're facing personally or pastorally, we know that we're facing them with him. Every retreat is an opportunity for us to yoke ourselves anew to the Lord Jesus, to the power of his resurrection living in us from within, raising us from the dead.
 - The theme of this retreat will be "The Missionary Metamorphosis of the Church: Pope Francis, the Reform of the Church and the Reform of the Priesthood." Gospel this morning of the woman looking downward. Msgr. Dario Viganò's story of Pope Francis' "resurrection" on the day of the election, coupled to Pope Francis' own words of experiencing some darkness. We may have come here to retreat likewise looking at the ground, weighed down by years and struggles of one sort or another. The Lord wants to give us a similar grace to the one he gave Pope Francis. The problems we confront in our own situations are less formidable than the ones Pope Francis is addressing with great vigor, and so his example gives us hope!
- How to live a good retreat
 - Last year, I was on Long Island preaching a retreat to about 70 college seminarians. Because of the audience, at the beginning of the retreat I gave them some principles on how to make a retreat well because I knew that for some of them it was the first lengthy retreat they had ever made. I was surprised that after that conference two of the priests on faculty told me that they, too, found those basic orientations a helpful reminder to them as well, because over the course of time they had begun to look at retreats a little bit more as a time for "rest and relaxation" in general than the particular type of rest Christ wants to give us by yoking us to him. So, for whatever it's worth, I'd like to share a few of those principles.
 - A retreat is a time fundamentally of persevering prayer. Persevering prayer is hard work. It requires a commitment. Some days prayer may be easy, full of consolation. Other days our prayer will be as arid as the Sahara. But the key is to keep going, to fight off distractions by uniting ourselves with the Lord.
 - To receive these graces, God wants our free cooperation. That requires preparation. Parable of the Sower and Seed. Four types of soil, all found in priests:
 - Hardened soil of the one already set firmly in his ways, or of the know-it-all or of the inveterate sinner
 - Superficial soil of the one who is looking to be entertained and fight off boredom, but the one who's not really interested in a deep change of life, who doesn't want the seed to go to the core of his being. Seed will get scorched as soon as a pleasant or unpleasant distraction arises.

- Thorny soil. Worldly cares and anxieties, lure of riches and pleasures. Definitely chokes the word. Priests are not immune from these types of thorns. We need to throw our cares on the Lord. We need to place the treasure of our heart in him.
- Good soil. Bears fruit. Not just “some” fruit, but abundant fruit, 30, 60 or 100 fold. One seed of the Lord well planted ought to be able to change our life in 30 or 100 ways or more. That’s the power of the word of God. Received with faith the size of a mustard seed, it can translate the Catskill mountain range.
- Pope Francis, on whose words and work this retreat will be based, commented on this parable back in June at daily Mass that to bear fruit we need to be prepared (June 8, 2013):
 - What does it mean to guard the Word of God? It means “opening our hearts” to the Word, “as the earth opens to the seed”. Some seeds scatter and “are eaten by birds,” and this happens when the Word is not guarded. It means that some hearts “do not know how to receive it”. Sometimes the seed falls “on earth with many rocks and the seed cannot take root and dies.” That is, they are not capable of guardianship because they are inconstant. “The Word can also fall on unprepared ground”, he added, “where there are thorns and in the end it dies” because “it is not guarded”. But what are these thorns? Jesus says it is our “attachment to wealth, vice”. To guard the Word is to receive it, but we must “prepare our hearts to receive it. Meditate on what the Word tells us today, watching what happens in life.” This is what Mary did, ... she pondered these events. Here lies the task for Christians: to welcome the Word of God and to think about what it means today.
- So we need to prepare our hearts for what the Lord wants to do in us during these days.
- For this to happen, we need to talk about a few things.
 - Conferences and Homilies
 - I’d encourage you to take notes if it will help you to retain the material and nourish your prayer. Eventually I’m going to put up my outlines for the conferences as well as audio recordings on catholicpreaching.com, so don’t think you have to get it all down. We’ll be collating and covering a great deal of Pope Francis’ pre-papal and papal writings, homilies, speeches, and other sources — way too much for anyone to keep up with, but I’ll provide them all to you for further prayer and study. I’d encourage you to take down the phrases, the words, in which you know that the Lord is speaking directly to your heart, when he’s encouraging you, when he’s calling you to conversion. Then after the conferences, you can continue your conversation with the Lord about those things in prayer.
 - We’ll talk over the course of this retreat on what Pope Francis says about sacred preaching. He says the point is to invigorate that covenantal dialogue with the Lord. It’s supposed to start it, or reignite it, or strengthen it. Try to leave with one or a few points to continue the conversation going, focusing on how the Lord wants to help you bear fruit from that word.
 - Silence
 - We’re not going to bear good fruit if we’re giving it to thorns or to superficiality.
 - Ponder the medicinal punishment of Zechariah. To help him become more like Mary.
 - Mary’s heart. Putting together and treasuring things in her heart.
 - So at a practical level, I’m going to invite you to keep a reverential silence, not just external but internal. This is to open our ears to hear the Lord speak to us in gentle breezes. Be respectful that others are having a conversation. We all know that in priestly life, we’re constantly being interrupted. A retreat is a chance for a lengthy, far less interrupted conversation with the Lord. Be jealous of this time just with Him. We need to cultivate this habit of silence if we’re ever going to be contemplatives on the street.

- Also love each other enough as true brothers not to try to steal them from the Lord. If they're weak, strengthen them by your good example to persevere on retreat just like you want to help them persevere in Christian fidelity and in their vocation.
- Likewise, I'm going to invite you to leave the world behind until Friday morning. Shut off your cell phone if you can or only check it to see if you've gotten emergency calls. Don't access the web or the news. If you use your phone or your Tablet to pray, put it on airport mode.
- We're in an age in which it's increasingly hard for people to be silent. We're supposed to be teachers of that silence and if we can't do it for five days, we're never going to help our people by our example.
 - Confession
 - Every retreat we should go to confession, but that's not enough.
 - Pray for the grace to make the best confession of your life. Get it all out. Hide nothing.
 - General confession, where we really look to the roots are, the idols I have, the compromises, the places I'm making peace with.
 - A general confession, as you know, doesn't have to be long. It can still be done in about five minutes with greater preparation. Perhaps you can examine on the seven capital sins, or the beatitudes, or the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.
- The Missionary Metamorphosis of the Church
 - Nineteen months ago, I was summoned to Rome to do color commentary with Raymond Arroyo for EWTN's coverage of the conclave that elected Pope Francis. His brother Cardinals elected him, as both they and he have stated on multiple occasions, to reform the Church. Three days after the white smoke rose, he joked with us media representatives that some had suggested he take the name Hadrian, after Hadrian VI, the Pope who tried to reform the Church's central administration after the scandals that led to the Protestant Reformation. Instead he took the name of the greatest reformer in Church history, Francis of Assisi, who was the Lord's instrument to rebuild his dilapidated Church as a whole, one living stone at a time.
 - The chief corruption in the Church, Cardinal Bergoglio declared to his brother cardinals during their pre-conclave meetings, has nothing to do with banks, or butlers, or bumbling bureaucracies. It occurs when the Church becomes self-referential and spiritually worldly, "living within herself, of herself and for herself." The fundamental reform the Church needed, he continued, was to remember that she does not have a mission, but is a mission. Unless she's coming out of herself to bring Christ and his light to those who are living in darkness on the outskirts of life, she's simply sick.
 - We saw this corruption among the apostles who on several occasions began to focus on jockeying for position in an earthly kingdom they presumed Jesus had come to inaugurate rather than on denying themselves, picking up their cross and follow Jesus to all those on the periphery.
 - We've seen it throughout Church history when some have fought more for benefices and sinecures or cushy assignments than for the towel to wash others' feet.
 - We see it in segments of the Church bureaucracy — from chanceries to the Roman Curia — when priests and prelates use their positions to try to advance their own "careers" or the careers of friends.
 - And we see it in Church institutions — dioceses, parishes, schools, hospitals, charities — that begin to focus all of their efforts on those who are already coming, rather than getting outside of themselves to serve all those for whom Jesus gave his life.
 - Cardinal Bergoglio told the Cardinals what the Church most needed in a new leader. The "next pope" had to be a "man who, from the contemplation and adoration of Jesus Christ, helps the Church to go out of herself to the existential peripheries, who helps her to be a fruitful mother living off the sweet and comforting joy of evangelizing." Not only did the Cardinals think their colleague from Buenos Aires fulfilled those criteria but that papal job description aptly summarizes what Pope Francis has been trying to accomplish since his election.

- In his programmatic apostolic exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel,” the object of our prayer during these days, Pope Francis expressed his hopes for the missionary metamorphosis of the Church that he’s been seeking to catalyze. “I dream of a ...missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures, can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.”
- The reform he has been begun of the Curia — with the help of various new advisory councils, commissions and consultants — intends to align the Church’s central infrastructure to support and advance the mission that is the Church rather than frustrate it by structures more apt for previous centuries. But this is a reform that he wants to go far beyond the Vatican walls. He wants it to reach every Catholic. To be a disciple at all, he writes in his exhortation, is to be a “missionary disciple.” Francis wants each believer to say with him, “I am a mission on this earth; this is the reason why I am here.” And as the whole world has been observing, Pope Francis is convinced that the reason why he was elected, why he is here, is to carry out that “sweet and comforting” task of evangelization. He has been a personification of the missionary reform of the Church, not just catechizing but *showing* everyone what a missionary disciple is and does.
- The Holy Father is also giving by word and example what he thinks is a description of the priests Christ needs today, those who from his own prayerful contemplation and worship of the Lord will help lead the Church out of herself to bring Christ and his healing, his passionate warmth, his truth to others, rather than waiting for the world to come to him.
- “It’s key that we Catholics, both clergy and laity, go out to meet the people,” he stressed in the 2010 book-length interview, *El Jesuita*. This is “not only because the Church’s mission is to announce the Gospel, but because failing to do so harms us. ... A Church that limits herself to administering parish work, that lives enclosed within a community, experiences what someone in prison does: physical and mental atrophy.” A Church that merely protects its small flock, that gives all or most of its attention to its faithful clientele, he believes, “is a Church that is sick.”
- He wants to help the entire Church, beginning with the clergy, to recover its full health, by yoking ourselves to the Divine Physician as he goes out to the peripheries to make house calls to every lost sheep.
- Over the course of this retreat, we will examine:
 - Pope Francis’ powerful and encouraging thoughts on the mission we have been given by Christ in 2014 and beyond, to re-evangelize our culture, to reevangelize our priest colleagues, our parishioners, our friends, our families, our communities, our neighborhoods, with the beauty, joy and truth of the Gospel. The true reform of the Church will be when we, living with the contagious and lively enthusiasm that marked the early Church, draw people to the Source of our joy and life, Jesus himself.
 - Pope Francis’ profound thoughts on the essential message of Christianity, which he believes is God’s merciful love that led God to take on our own humanity and enter our world to die on the Cross to save us.
 - Pope Francis’ thoughts on the priestly vocation, priestly life, and priestly apostolate.
 - Pope Francis’ thoughts on priestly charity.
 - Pope Francis’ thoughts on the missionary reform of priestly preaching.
 - Pope Francis’ thoughts on prayer.
 - Pope Francis’ thoughts on spiritual poverty and the Church’s participation in the reform of an economy he says that often rules instead of serves.
 - Pope Francis’ thoughts on spiritual worldliness, gossip, and clerical envy.
 - Pope Francis’ thoughts on the Blessed Virgin Mary.
- For these conferences, I’ll depend not only on Pope Francis’ manifesto laying out his vision for Church renewal, *Evangelii Gaudium*, but also what he’s said in various homilies, Angelus meditations and speeches over the course of the almost 20 months, as well as on what his probably his greatest pre-papal achievement, what’s called the Aparecida document, the fruit of his work leading all the bishops of Central and South American (CELAM) in coming up with a plan for the New Evangelization of that continent. It’s perhaps the greatest document in the history of the Church

blending profound theology and concrete practice.

- The Reform of the Priesthood
 - Before we get there, though, we need to tackle an elephant in the retreat center.
 - Every major reform in Church history has begun with a reform of the priesthood, and the reform that Pope Francis was elected to carry out involves very much this dimension, as we'll be able to ponder in depth during our time together. I want to tackle one of the most important parts of that reform at the end of this conference, but before I get there, I'd like to confront one of the issues that has been percolating to the surface from many priests, including many great priests. It's that Pope Francis seems to be really critical of his brother priests.
 - On Mardi Gras this year, Pope Francis acknowledged it, saying to his brother priests in the Diocese of Rome, "Some of you have phoned, written a letter, [or] I spoke [to you] on the phone [saying] ... 'But Father, what have you got against priests?'" Because they were saying that I bash priests! I do not wish to bash you here," he said.
 - One of my good priest friends, Fr. Raymond de Souza of the Archdiocese of Kingston, Ontario, summed up the sentiment in an article for the National Catholic Register a year ago:
 - "Pope Francis is capable of speaking with great tenderness about those far from the Church. When discussing his brother Jesuits, even those who sent him into exile and were active obstacles to the mission of Jesus Christ and the Ignatian charism, the Holy Father speaks with nuance and delicacy. Yet when he speaks of the parish clergy, his remarks are almost always critical, inveighing against the lazy priest in his rectory, unmoved by the suffering of the afflicted in need of mercy, reduced to a functionary who has become an obstacle rather than a conduit of God's grace. Priests need to hear that to be challenged and corrected, but fallen men that we are, it is not easy. The Holy Father intends his criticisms ... for the whole Church, not just the priests and bishops. Yet, often, the clergy feel singled out for criticism or feel underappreciated. Perhaps they ought to stop feeling sorry for themselves and 'man up,' but the phenomenon is real and explains part of the uneasiness" some have with him."
 - It is true that Pope Francis has spent more time calling priests to conversion than patting them on the back. In an affirmation age this has been a little jolting. For me, I've been a little frustrated by his mentioning on several occasions those priests who turn the confessional into a "torture chamber." I've gone to confession weekly for 25 years, lived in various countries, probably confessed to 300 priests in six different languages and in the thousands of confessions I've made, I can only recall three occasions when a priest turned it into a torture chamber. I can't speak to the situation in Argentina, but I doubt that there are many sacramental sadists hiding behind purple stoles in reconciliation rooms. The Pope's essential point, of course, is to call all priests to be merciful representations of the Father of the Prodigal Son in the confessional, rather than harsh judges, a point that every pope should insist upon, but regularly mentioning priests who turn the confessional into an Abu Ghraib may hinder the work of merciful priests who are trying to get people back to confession but who are afraid because of one bad experience in the past.
 - But it's important for us to ask what's behind this criticism of Pope Francis, which is obviously intended as constructive and done with affection. I think the answer can be found in a retreat Cardinal Bergoglio preached in 2006 to the Spanish Bishops that's now been published in English as "In Him Alone is Our Hope."
 - He gave a conference there entitled, "The Lord who reprimands and pardons us," which started off by saying,
 - "As we read the Gospels, a paradoxical pattern emerges: the Lord is more inclined to warn, correct and reprimand those who are closest to him — his disciples and Peter in particular — than those who are distant. The Lord acts in this way to make it clear that ministry is pure grace; it does not depend on the merits or competencies of the one chosen for the mission. In this context of the Lord's gratuitous choice and his absolute fidelity, to be reprimanded by him means that one is receiving a sign of God's immense mercy."
 - Jesus reprimands those closer to him more than those who are distant. These corrections are done out of love and help to remind them that their whole ministry is one of grace.

- The future Pope takes up several of the Lord's reprimands, which he applies to the life and ministry of priests and bishops:
 - The Lord reprimands us from our dismissive tendencies, which stem from our lack of charity, as he does at the feeding of the crowd, when the disciples wanted to dismiss the crowd rather than feed them themselves. He also rebukes them for not letting the children come to him, or when they wanted Jesus to get rid of the Canaanite woman. "With firmness and with patience the Lord corrects them. He is not in a hurry to dismiss the people nor is he bothered when they come close to him. The Lord does not put limits on the nearness of the people. He is the neighbor *par excellence*. ... He lets himself be touched by the people who clamor for his presence. ... This profound openness and availability reveals a total self-emptying that will find its most intense expression on the Cross, but which the Lord was living day after day. Conversion from our sins, from our egoism, leads us to being available for others."
 - The Lord reprimands us for the fears that arise from our lack of faith, like he reprimanded the apostles in the boat for their lack of faith during a storm. Their fear is because of their lack of faith. "He wants to persuade them that he is greater than every challenge, every trial, every temptation. And we are just like the Apostles in the storm! Dominated by fear, we too are more than capable of stumbling and falling into sin." Fear leads not only to cowardice but also to foolhardy temerity.
 - The Lord reprimands us for our weaknesses that come from a lack of hope, especially with regard to the salvific meaning of the Cross and of suffering. Jesus called Peter Satan and told him he was thinking not as God does but as men do because he couldn't look at the Lord's death or his own suffering with hope. Jesus firmly reprimands Peter. The essential cross Christ gives us is "the weight of the community entrusted to our care. ... It is the Lord who puts it on our shoulders and tells us 'Take up your Cross and follow me.' The Cross is a yoke carried in tandem and the Lord bears most of the weight. In order to carry his cross, the pastor will need the strength that comes from hope, which he should beg for in prayer. Then, for example, he will have the courage to make the necessary decisions, even if they are unpopular. He will also have the magnanimity to begin difficult enterprises in the service of God ... and to persevere in carrying them out without becoming discouraged when obstacles arise."
 - The Lord reproaches us for our inability to keep watch with him, as he did with Simon, James and John in the Garden of Gethsemane. We must keep watch with Jesus in prayer, but also must watch out for the flock. "To supervise refers more to the concern for doctrine and ritual in their expression and practice, whereas to keep watch means making sure the people have enough salt and light in their hearts. To be vigilant means being on the lookout for danger, whereas to keep watch is more about patiently supporting the ways the Lord brings the salvation of his people to fruition. To be vigilant, it is enough to be awake, alert and shrewd. To keep watch requires meekness, patience and the constancy of tested charity. To supervise means carefully inspecting the whole, without overlooking any details. To keep watch means knowing how to see the essentials. To supervise and be vigilant both entail a certain degree of control. To keep watch, on the other hand, speaks of hope, ... the hope of the merciful Father who keeps watch over the hearts of his growing sons." He proposes St. Joseph as a model: "In Joseph we encounter the faithful and foresighted *episkopos* ordained by the Lord to serve as head of his family. He is the man who watches over the child and his mother, even in his dreams, and with the tenderness of a faithful and discreet servant, he lives out and fulfills the Father's role. From this profound watchfulness of Joseph springs that silent vision of the whole, capable of taking care of his little flock with meager means (he transforms a manger for animals into the crib of the Word incarnate!). From this watchfulness also comes the vigilant and shrewd vision that succeeded in avoiding all the dangers that threatened the child."
- He then draws a conclusion about our own reprimands:

- Let us review all the times the Lord has reprimanded us, and ask ourselves what he wishes to teach us through them. And let us reflect on ourselves in order to make amends. We should not be afraid of his reprimands, for they are proof of the Lord's closeness to us, that he takes us seriously. That he corrects us, just as he corrected Peter, is a sign of our friendship with him and our apostolic zeal! ... He puts up with us and corrects us and always helps us grow, without ever belittling us or withdrawing his esteem and respect for us. Filled with contrition for our hardheadedness and our slowness to comprehend him, let us say like Peter, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' While we offer our contrition, we feel the Lord encouraging us again, and he says to us, 'Feed my sheep!'
 - That's what I think is behind his approach with regard to his brother priests. There's a special love, bond, closeness and friendship, not a negative attitude. I'd encourage us all to keep this in mind throughout the retreat, especially when we tackle what he teaches about priestly virtues and vices.
- Conclusion
 - The Times of London at the beginning of the 20th century sent out an inquiry to famous authors, asking "What's wrong with the world today?" GK Chesterton wrote back, "Dear Sir, I am. Yours, GK Chesterton."
 - As we continue with our retreat, led in a sense by Pope Francis through his thoughts, let us ask the Lord for the grace to recognize that the reform of the Church begins with the reform of the priesthood, and the reform of the priesthood begins with our own spiritual reform.
 - That's the work Christ wants to do in us during these days, to refresh us, heal us, and send us out yoked to him to help him anew save and redeem the world.