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“Encountering Christ with the Help of Pope Francis: Who do you say that I am?”
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Pope Francis and the Missionary Transformation of the Church:
Encountering Christ in Such a Way that We Cannot Help But Share Him With Others

- Preface
 - It’s a great joy to be here with you here at Alhambra as we enter into retreat together, when Jesus says to us what he said to the disciples after they were exhausted with work, “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 Sacred Heart Retreat House 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 encountering him in such a way that we respond 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, 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 “Encountering Christ with the Help of Pope Francis: Who Do You Say that I am.” On the schedules for the retreat you’ll find what Pope Francis tweeted 14 months ago (August 30, 2014): “Faith is not something decorative or for show. To have faith means to put Christ truly at the center of our lives,” and we’ll have a chance together with Christ’s vicar on this retreat to ponder various ways Christ is calling us not merely to let him have a part of our life, but to center our existence on him, to grow to love him not with a part of our mind, heart, soul, strength, time, talents and resources, but with all we can. Tomorrow we’ll have a chance to reflect on encountering Christ in his merciful love, in personal prayer and in the Eucharist, and on Sunday we’ll have a chance to review how we encounter him in those in need. To introduce the whole retreat tonight, however, I’d like to look at who we say Jesus is to ourselves, to others and to the world. I’d like to do this by examining Pope Francis’ principal work in his 20 months as pope, which is the Missionary Metamorphosis of the Church, and his summons to the whole Church to encounter Christ in such a way that we cannot help but share him with others.
- How to live a good retreat
 - Before we begin, however, so that this retreat can be a real life-changing encounter with Jesus, I’d like to mention a few principles on how to live a fruitful retreat.
 - 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 seeking to unite 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 frequently in Catholic retreatants:
 - The hardened soil of the one already set firmly in his ways, or of the know-it-all or of the person who is hardened through trying to justify a particular pattern of sin.
 - The 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.

- The thorny soil of worldly cares and anxieties, the lure of riches and pleasures. These definitely choke the word. None of us is 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.
- And the good soil that Jesus says 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 San Gabriel Mountain Range that overlooks us.
- 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 on catholicpreaching.com and the sisters will be offering audio recordings of the talks, 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 everything will be provided to 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.
 - 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 was contemplative in which she put together and treasured things in her heart.
 - 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 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 spiritual siblings 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 Saturday afternoon. Shut off your cell phone if you can. 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 Christians are supposed to be teachers of that silence and if we can't do it for a weekend, we're never going to help others.
- 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. Look at the roots of your sins, the idols you have, the compromises you've been making. Don't just examine if you're breaking the Ten Commandments, but if you're living the Beatitudes, if you're carrying out the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, if you're really placing God first in your life and seeking genuinely to love him with your mind or filling your mind with worldly thoughts, to love him with your heart above other loves, if you're loving him with your soul by remaining in the state of grace, if you're loving him with your strength by making a sincere daily effort to grow in union with him.
 - Such a deeper confession, as you know, doesn't have to be long. It can be done in about five minutes with greater preparation.
- The Missionary Metamorphosis of the Church” Encountering Jesus in such a way that we have to share him with others.
 - Twenty 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. He took the name of Francis, after Francis of Assisi, to show the type of reform he hoped to bring about. Jesus spoke to Francis in 1207 from a Crucifix in the dilapidated Church of San Damiano on the slope of Assisi saying, “Francis, rebuild my Church, which you can see is falling into ruin. St. Francis originally thought that the Lord was asking him to repair the crumbling hillside chapel, but the Lord had a much bigger rebuilding project in mind: the Church as a whole, which we know is not made of marble, wood, bricks and glass but men, women, boys and girls, living stones, meant to build their life fully on Christ the Cornerstone. The reform of the Church begins with bringing each of us back into shape. 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.” A retreat is always a deep time of re-formation, of opening ourselves up to God's help to form us anew and more deeply into the image and likeness of Christ.
 - The reform that Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio was elected to carry out was the one he announced to the cardinal six days before he was elected. He said that the chief corruption in the Church 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.” It occurs when the Church seeks truly encountering Christ and bringing him to others, but instead just starts focusing on institutional concerns.
 - 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.” It's a Church that encounters Christ in prayer, in adoration, in the sacraments and then seeks to bring him to others. 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,” 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."

- For this transformation to occur, each of us needs to be transformed. To be a disciple at all, he writes in this 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 this happens by each of our encountering Christ in such a way that not only do we tell him that he is the Messiah and Son of the Living God but are bursting with a desire to share that Good News with others.
- Francis says in EG 264 that the primary reason for evangelizing is the love and salvation of Jesus that we have received, urging us to greater love of him. "What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known?" (265) Evangelization responds to that expectation. "We have a treasure of life and love that cannot deceive, and a message that cannot mislead or disappoint." Evangelization comes from our being "convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to. ... We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize." If we've really encountered Jesus, then we can't but share him. We remember the experience of Saints Andrew when he first met Jesus. He ran to bring news of him to his brother Simon, who became the first pope. We remember when Jesus met the woman at the well in Samaria. She ran to tell all the people in Sychar. We remember what happened when Jesus revealed himself to the disciples in Emmaus. They ran uphill seven miles in darkness to share the news of his resurrection with the other disciples. Once we truly encounter Christ, once we grasp who he is, how he loves us, how he accompanies us, we can't keep him to ourselves. We must share him.
- The sad fact is, however, that many Catholics have not had this experience. Some Christians' lives, Pope Francis said, "seem like Lent without Easter." He said Christians "must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!" World won't hear "dejected, discouraged, impatient, anxious" evangelizers but those whose lives glow with fervor and Christian joy, the fervor and joy that comes from encountering the Lord. Pope Francis adds, ""We have a treasure of life and love that cannot deceive, and a message that cannot mislead or disappoint." It ennobles us and is never out of date. This infinite love cures our infinite sadness." This (renewed) encounter alone can free us from self-absorption and God and bring us beyond ourselves to full truth of who we are. This inspires our evangelization. "If we have received the love that restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?" (8).
- For us to share that joy, however, we must first have it. In a homily on Dec 6, 2013, Pope Francis observed that, while we are accustomed to think of Jesus preaching, healing, walking through the streets speaking to people, or even being raised upon the Cross, "we are not accustomed to think of Jesus smiling, or joyful". However, he said, "Jesus was full of joy." We ought to ponder Jesus' joy and his desire to share the love of the Father with others.
- To be truly alive in faith requires encountering Christ and bringing others to encounter him.
 - (Catechists, Sept 27) The heart of a catechist always beats with this systolic and diastolic movement: union with Christ – encounter with others. Both of these: I am one with Jesus and I go forth to encounter others. If one of these movements is missing, the heart no longer beats, it can no longer live. The heart of the catechist receives the gift of the kerygma, and in turn offers it to others as a gift. ... The catechist is conscious of having received a gift, the gift of faith, and he or she then gives that gift in turn to others. This is something beautiful. We don't keep a percentage for ourselves! Whatever we receive, we give!
- Stages of the formation of Missionary Discipleship
 - The greatest pastoral achievement of Cardinal Bergoglio before his election to the papacy was the Aparecida document from 2007.
 - Cardinal Bergoglio was the chairman of the team of CELAM bishops to put together the 2007 concluding document of the Aparecida Conference, the fifth General Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, which is one of the most significant documents ever published by

the Church. It's the master plan for the New Evangelization in Latin America. But it also gives crucial insights for forming evangelized evangelizers, "missionary disciples in communion," anywhere.

- It said that there were five stages in this formation, something we should ponder as we begin this retreat and think about in terms of passing the faith on to kids and grandkids, students, friends and others.
 - *The Encounter with Jesus Christ:* Those who will be his disciples are already seeking him (cf. Jn 1:38), but it is the Lord who calls them: "Follow me" (Mk 1:14; Mt 9:9). The deeper meaning of the search must be discovered, and the encounter with Christ that leads to Christian initiation must be fostered. This encounter must be constantly renewed by personal testimony, proclamation of the *kerygma*, and the missionary action of the community. The *kerygma* is not simply a stage, but the leitmotiv of a process that culminates in the maturity of the disciple of Jesus Christ. Without the *kerygma*, the other aspects of this process are condemned to sterility, with hearts not truly converted to the Lord. Only out of the *kerygma* does the possibility of a true Christian initiation occur. Hence, the Church should have it present in all its actions
 - *Conversion:* It is the initial response of those who have listened to the Lord in wonder, who believe in Him through the action of the Spirit, and who decide to be His friend and go with him, changing how they think and live, accepting the cross of Christ, conscious that dying to sin is attaining life. In Baptism and the sacrament of Reconciliation Christ's Redemption is actualized for us.
 - *Discipleship:* The person constantly matures in knowledge, love, and following of Jesus the master, and delves deeper into the mystery of His person, his example, and his teaching. Ongoing catechesis and sacramental life are of fundamental importance for this stage; they strengthen initial conversion, and enable missionary disciples to persevere in Christian life and mission in the midst of the world that challenges them.
 - *Communion:* There can be no Christian life except in community: in families, parishes, communities of consecrated life, base communities, other small communities, and movements. Like the early Christians who met in community, the disciples take part in the life of the Church, and in the encounter with brothers and sisters, living the love of Christ in solidarity, in fraternal life. They are also accompanied and encouraged by the community and its shepherds as they mature in the live of the Spirit.
 - *Mission:* As they get to know and love their Lord, disciples experience the need to share with others their joy at being sent, at going to the world to proclaim Jesus Christ, dead and risen, to make real the love and service in the person of the neediest, in short, to build the Kingdom of God. Mission is inseparable from discipleship, and hence it must not be understood as a stage subsequent to formation, although it is carried out in different ways, depending on one's own vocation and on the moment in human and Christian maturation at which the person stands.

- Conclusion

- We finish with some thoughts with which Pope Francis finished World Youth Day in Brazil last July, which are a fitting summary of everything we've been pondering tonight at the beginning of this retreat and something that points to the type of fruit that Jesus would like to bear 30, 60, 100-fold or more as this retreat ends.
- (WYD July 28) The experience of this **encounter [with Christ]** must not remain locked up in your life or in the small group of your parish, your movement, or your community. That would be like withholding oxygen from a flame that was burning strongly. Faith is a flame that grows stronger the more it is shared and passed on, so that everyone may know, love and confess Jesus Christ, the Lord of life and history (cf. Rom 10:9) Careful, though! Jesus did not say: "Go, if you would like to, if you have the time", but he said: "Go and make disciples of all nations." Sharing the experience of faith, bearing witness to the faith, proclaiming the Gospel: this is a command that the Lord entrusts to the whole Church, and that includes you; but it is a command that is born not from a desire for domination, from the desire for power, but from the force of love, from the fact that Jesus first

came into our midst and did not give us just a part of himself, but he gave us the whole of himself, he gave his life in order to save us and to show us the love and mercy of God. Jesus does not treat us as slaves, but as people who are free, as friends, as brothers and sisters; and he not only sends us, he accompanies us, he is always beside us in our mission of love. Where does Jesus send us? There are no borders, no limits: he sends us to everyone. The Gospel is for everyone, not just for some. It is not only for those who seem closer to us, more receptive, more welcoming. It is for everyone. Do not be afraid to go and to bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem farthest away, most indifferent. The Lord seeks all, he wants everyone to feel the warmth of his mercy and his love.

- Let's ask the Lord to fill us with that warmth so that we can, like they did, go out with him to bring the fire of his love to all those we meet and light the world ablaze!