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Retreat for the Permanent Deacons of the Diocese of Phoenix and Their Wives on
“Pope Francis and the Missionary Transformation of the Church and the Diaconate”
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Jer 11:18-20, Ps 7, Jn 7:40-53

BECOMING PART OF JESUS' 'VENGEANCE' IN THE MISSIONARY TRANSFORMATION OF THE CHURCH

- Yesterday we began a new cycle of Lenten readings in the Old Testament focusing on the prophecies about Jesus' suffering and death. We heard in the Book of Wisdom yesterday the very explicit details of the envy that led to Jesus' betrayal, besetting the Just One because his very being was an obnoxious censure to others' way of believing and living. Today Jeremiah prophetically enfleshes the persecution Jesus himself would undergo. “Like a trusting lamb led to the slaughter, ... they were hatching plots against me,” trying to “destroy the tree in its vigor, cut[ting] him off from the land of the living so that his name may be spoken of no more.”
- We see those plots against Jesus getting fulfilled in today's Gospel. The temple guards were sent out by the Jewish leaders to arrest Jesus because, as we've been seeing in recent days, the leaders considered Jesus an untrained blasphemer or worse. They were in fact seeking to kill him because they were convinced that he was an agent of the devil, working miracles not by the power of God but by the power of Beelzebul to destroy the Jewish religion by violating the Sabbath through works of charity, driving money changers out of the temple and speaking about the Temple's destruction and rebuilding, befriending notorious sinners, pretending to forgive sins, and various other practices that conveyed by which Jesus was showing not only acting with divine authority but that he believed himself to be the actual Son of God. Rather than being filled with joy when Jesus reconciled sinners, or made the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, or freed the possessed of their demons, they responded with envy, anger and unholy homicidal thoughts.
- But not everyone obviously saw Jesus this way. St. John tells us today there was “division because of him.” Some thought he was “the Prophet,” the fulfillment of Moses' words that after him someone would come to whom they should listen and obey just like the listened to and obeyed him (Deut 18:15). Others said, “This is the Messiah (Christ).” But then others retorted that the Messiah could never come from Galilee, because he was prophesied to come from Bethlehem. None of those critics ever bothered to ask Jesus where he was born. They heard he was a Nazarene and that's all they needed in order to dismiss him as the Messiah because they didn't want to accept the type of Messianic reign he was heralding, one far different than the Messianic kingdom for which they aspired.
- It's important for us to grasp that *Jesus always provokes division*. He himself said elsewhere in the Gospel, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's enemies will be those of his household” (Mt 10:34-36). While at the same time he is the Prince of Peace who came to give and leave us his peace and establish the definitive peace treaty between us and God through the forgiveness of sins (Jn 14:27), he at the same time knew that he would be a “sign of contradiction” (Lk 2:34) because no one would be able to remain neutral in response to him. We would either be “with him” or “against him,” we'd either “gather with him” or “scatter” (Mt 12:30). It's not that he would personally *cause* division because he had come to bring peace; but division would ensue because of him, because there would be some who would accept and follow him and others who would refuse. Pope Francis said this morning in his homily in Naples, “The Word of the Lord, yesterday like today, always causes a division – the word of God always divides – between those who welcome it and those who reject it. Sometimes, it sparks an interior conflict in our hearts; this happens when we perceive the attractiveness, beauty and truth of Jesus' words, but at the same time we reject them because they are challenging, they put us in difficulty, and cost us too much to observe.”
- For us as priests, deacons and faithful disciples, we need to grasp that often, we, too, will be signs of

contradiction. People will claim we're divisive because we don't want to worship their own desires and designs as divine. But, rather, it's sin that divides. The devil is the diabolos, the one who throws us off course. It's not Christ. Christ and anyone truly united with him, however, will be the occasion of division for others. We should never forget that when he was seeking to give others the greatest gift in the history of the world — his own body and blood in the Eucharist — most of his *disciples* separated from him. We shouldn't be naïve. Christ the King is not Rodney King. None of us — Jesus foremost — wants division. He came so that we all might be one. But he leaves us free and through sin we and others choose division. And we need to be ready for that.

- Today in the Gospel we see three different ways of responding to Jesus that we ought to consider because they shine a mirror for us to examine our own response to Jesus during this prayer on retreat.
- The first happens with the Temple guards. They had been sent to arrest Jesus but they couldn't bring themselves to do it. When they were asked, "Why didn't you bring him?" they replied, "Never before has anyone spoken like this man!" They were astonished and amazed at Jesus' incredible words. Their souls were touched. They knew that a man who spoke like that couldn't possibly be a malefactor. Pope Francis said of them this morning in a homily in Naples, that theirs "is the voice of truth that resonates" in simple, good men. It would be like police officers today being sent to arrest a beautiful four year old girl or sweet 106 year old great-great-great-grandmother, bound her in cuffs and have her do a "perp walk" because some superior officer commanded them to do it in order to put on a show. Beyond that simple common sense, however, they were fascinated by Jesus and his words. These were not a bunch of naturally pious women or children. They were cops, basically soldiers, hearty men, who probably spent much of their time engaged in the types of things men of force engage in whenever they're together on duty but not engaged in work. They're not singing praise and worship songs together! And yet these probably coarse men were profoundly touched by Jesus, which teaches us something about Jesus and the power of his words. For us it should leave us wondering that if those men could be so moved by Jesus' words, recognizing that no man had ever spoken like him before, are we even more amazed and astonished by his words?
- The second reaction is by the chief priests and Pharisees. Hearing the guards testify to the power of Jesus' exhortations, they said, "Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law, is accursed." They had no openness whatsoever to Jesus. They already concluded that he was evil and nothing was going to change them. They even damned the crowd that was hanging on Jesus' discourses. They condescendingly spoke to the guards as if they were gullible to being lied to; after all, none of their leaders had accepted Jesus and therefore no one else should have either. These are the elites who in every age foster division against Jesus, because they don't want to accept him, his teaching, or his deeds. We can look back with a cultural distance and say, "Foolish Pharisees," but the type of division they caused from their ivory perches still happens today. There are many, inside and outside the Church, who think Jesus' teaching that divorce and remarriage is sinful adultery is foolish, who think that Jesus' teaching that the way we treat illegal immigrants is the way we treat Jesus himself is foolish, who believe his teaching that we're supposed to love enemies and pray for persecutors is foolish. They legalize the killing of innocent human beings in the womb and then lament at how divided our culture is about abortion. They legalize the so-called marriage of two men or two women and then complain at how divided our nation is about it. They try to force people to pay for others' abortions and then protest how divided our politics are. The same thing happens in homes and families when one accepts Jesus and others get jealous. Jesus came to bring communion with God and with others, but sin divides and the fundamental sin is the rejection of God and those he sends. The end of today's Gospel summarizes effectively the division that comes when everyone is not united in the true following and worship of God: "They each went to his own house," because they were each worshipping his own domesticated deity.
- The third response we see in the Gospel is that of Nicodemus. You remember Nicodemus. He is the member of the Sanhedrin who came to Jesus "at night," because he was too afraid to be seen with him during the daylight. He was himself drawn to Jesus but he really didn't want to pay the cost of discipleship. Various scholars have called him the "tentative" or "reluctant" disciple. Cardinal Bergoglio back in a 2006 retreat to Spanish bishops said he was an example of a conditional disciple, someone who would follow Jesus only if Jesus accepted his terms: "He wants a dialogue in security, coming under the cover of night to ask him questions," the future Pope told the Spanish hierarchy. "And Jesus, because he senses that the

Pharisee is not well disposed, lets him remain wrapped up in his trivial objections. For Nicodemus, such objections serve as an egoistic refuge for not being honest.” Today we see that. He knows that the objections of the chief priests and the Pharisees against Jesus are flowing out of envy because they’re not only afraid to change but afraid that they might lose their status. But instead of defending Jesus fully, he raises a legal objection. “Does our law condemn a man before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?” he asks. And when they accuse him of being a Galilean and an idiot who fails to grasp that “no prophet arises from Galilee,” of failing to grasp that no one consequential will ever come from those backwaters, he remains silent. We’ll meet Nicodemus once more after Jesus’ crucifixion. Whereas he could have sought to defend Jesus before he died, as Jesus was being condemned in a mock trial in which he was one of the judges, he did come to him to anoint his dead body afterward. He recognized who Jesus was and wanted to follow him, but his cowardice regularly got the worst of him. His example of following Jesus “a little” rather than all the way, of wanting to be his disciple but caving into human respect, ought to provoke in us the question of how courageous we are in being publicly identified with Jesus, of defending him, and his teachings, and the Church he founded when it comes under attack, or whether we prefer to come to Jesus in the shadows, when it won’t cost us too much, when our commitment won’t be total.

- On this Saturday, we should consider one more example, that of our Blessed Mother. She was one who was never in contradiction with the Lord. She was one who never divided herself from God. Like the guards, she was able to recognize with astonishment the power of God’s word and she, at the Annunciation and beyond, in a total act of faith, she allowed her life to develop according to that word — even though she knew it would inevitably lead to suffering and perhaps even her being stoned to death. She allowed her own heart to be pierced for her union with his Son, the Sign of Contradiction. She was still with him, standing, as he was hammered to that sign of contradiction on Calvary. And it was there, under the foot of the Cross and as she with the help of the women and Joseph of Arimathea were preparing Jesus’ body for burial, that she with maternal love welcomed Nicodemus. To the extent that we in our own lives have followed Jesus only at a distance, without a full commitment, without a willingness to pay the price, today she wants to welcome us, to help us not to be afraid to approach her Son to receive his mercy, and not to be afraid to follow him all the way.
- She’s with us here at the Mass where she wants to help us respond to Jesus’ word and his very person in his body, blood, soul and divinity with all we’ve got. In the first reading, Jeremiah wanted to see the vengeance God would take on those who were persecuting him. Mary witnessed the vengeance God took on those who killed her Son as he was fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah’s life. The vengeance God took was *mercy*, praying for persecutors and loving those who had made themselves his enemy, laying down his life so that they might live forever. As we come forward to receive that “vengeance” here in Holy Communion, we ask the Lord we’re about to receive to help us to become inflamed with that same holy, merciful revenge! And we ask him to make us part of that revenge, by being willing to suffer with him as signs of contradiction as we seek through, with and in him to go out to the world to turn it right side up and bathe it in his healing, restorative, merciful love!