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Retreat for the Permanent Deacons of the Diocese of Phoenix and Their Wives
“Pope Francis and the Missionary Transformation of the Church and the Diaconate”
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Jer 31:31-34, Ps 51, Heb 5:7-9, Jn 12:20-33

RESPONDING TO THE PERPETUAL DESIRE TO SEE JESUS

- In the older, majestic pulpits in Europe, often they would inscribe on the inside pulpit certain phrases from the Bible to remind the preacher about what he was mounting that pulpit to try to do. One of the most common, and my favorite, comes from today’s Gospel: “*Domne, volumus Iesum videre,*” “Sir, we wish to see Jesus!” People come to Mass to meet Jesus, to hear his words, to see him from different and new angles and get to know him. And every week the preacher’s job is to help everyone see him more clearly, to perceive his burning love for them, to discern more clearly what he’s asking of them.
- “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” So the Greeks in today’s Gospel said to Philip. Perhaps they had witnessed Jesus expel the moneychangers and animals from the Courtyard of the Gentiles in the Temple, as we focused on two weeks ago. Perhaps they had heard his reputation for miracles or for speaking with amazing and astonishing authority and wanted to find out for themselves. Whatever the reason, they had come to see Jesus, not just to have a “been there, done that” experience with a celebrity but to get to know him. This desire to see Jesus hasn’t waned in the 2000 years since it was articulated. In fact, this desire is far older than 2000 years. The psalms are full of those seeking the face of God, longing to come into face-to-face communion with him. “Your face, O Lord, I seek,” Psalm 27 encapsulates. Little did those who were praying throughout Old Testament times to seek God’s visage know that God would eventually take on a human face just like theirs! Still today, just as the ancient Israelites longed for God, just as the Greeks came to Philip searching for Jesus, so today so many come to us and other members of the Church and we need to be able, like Philip and Andrew, to bring them to the Lord. That’s what the new evangelization, the missionary transformation of the Church that Pope Francis is trying to catalyze, is all about.
- Jesus’ response to the Greeks’ desire to see him is not just surprising but outright shocking. He announced that they would see him glorified, but glorified not in the way everyone would might have expected as an exalted civil leader, not like was during the Transfiguration or as he will be at the end of time. No, Jesus said they would see him glorified when he would be lifted up from the earth on the Cross. It’s then that he would draw all people to himself. Seeing Jesus, in other words, means seeing him as a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, landing cold on the ground and being covered with birth, but then is raised as the new Tree of Life. If we’re seeking Jesus, this is where we must find him. We need to be where he is.
- To do that, we must follow him: “Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am there will my servant also be.” To find him we must follow him along the path of the grain of wheat, the path of losing our life so as to gain it. We must deny ourselves rather than affirm ourselves, pick up our Cross and die to ourselves on it, in order to follow him to real fruitful, unending life. This second point may seem equally shocking to us, just as shocking as Jesus’ glorification coming on the Cross. To understand either, however, we need to grasp that both actions are motivated by love and it’s real love — God’s for us and ours for him — that is behind both of these paradoxical commands.
- Pope Benedict commented on Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel back in 2006 in his first encyclical (*Deus Caritas Est*). He called Jesus’ path — which is supposed to become our path in faith — the “essence of love and indeed of human life itself.” Listen to the deep words of our former Holy Father: “Love is... a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God: ‘Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it,’ as Jesus says throughout the Gospels. In these words, Jesus portrays his own path, which leads through the Cross to the Resurrection: the path of

the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, and in this way bears much fruit. Starting from the depths of his own sacrifice and of the love that reaches fulfillment therein, he also portrays in these words the essence of love and indeed of human life itself.”

- The new and eternal covenant that Jeremiah prophesies in the first reading and that Jesus himself established, the new Passover on which Jesus as the new Moses wants to lead each of us, is an “exodus from the inward looking self to liberation through self-giving, authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.” We will only see God, we will only find our life, when we leave self-centeredness behind, when we leave trying to “preserve our life” in the rear-view mirror and rather learn to give our life as a grain of wheat, dying to ourselves in order to bear great fruit for God and others. This is the only path, Pope Benedict says, to the discovery of God and true self-discovery.
- So the first application of today’s Gospel is to ourselves who wish to see Jesus and love him in this world and forever in the next. In order to do that we need to travel this exodus from saving our life to losing it, from the inward-looking self to the freedom of giving ourselves in loving sacrifice for God and others.
 - This needs to occur in our prayer, in which we “lose our lives” in communion with God in order to “preserve them.” This is the way we come to see Jesus intimately with the eyes of the soul. Very often our prayer can be more about us than God. We can focus so much on our petitions that we can forget about praising and thanking God. Unlike Samuel who said, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,” we often say by our posture, “Listen, Lord, for I’ve got the floor.” We can come to the Lord with so many of our problems and occupy all our time with them then we can lift up our hearts to God who is and has the Solution. The first way to see Jesus is by living the exodus out of ourselves to him and others in love.
 - The exodus also needs to occur in our generosity. We’re called to die to our obsession with our own interests and begin to see Jesus in others, especially in those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, ill, in prison or otherwise in need. When we sacrifice out of love for them, Jesus tells us in St. Matthew’s Gospel, we sacrifice for Jesus. Putting others’ interests ahead of our own makes no sense to someone whose goals are exclusively of this world, but it makes perfect sense to those whose goals come from God. The more we give of ourselves, the more we gain ourselves. We can only keep what we give away. We’ll only bear fruit that will last forever when we follow Jesus down the path of self-giving love, the path of the grain of wheat.
 - The exodus also needs to occur in our moral life in general. The moral life is the exodus, the Passover, from saying, “My will be done” to “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Our will wants to save itself, to preserve itself, to assert itself. We need to kill it through obedience to God. We need to put to death life according to the flesh in order to live according to the Holy Spirit. That’s what Jesus did, as we learn in the second reading. He was perfected through his obedience to the will of God and he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. Likewise, we will become perfected — and become an instrument of salvation in the lives of those we care about and so many others we may not even know — only through our obedience to God’s will, by dying to ourselves so that God may live. In some cases, as in Jesus’ life, as in the lives of the prophets who pointed to him and the apostles who announced him, this moral path may lead to our being lifted up on the Cross, to being martyred out of obedience to God when others try to have us make them our gods. The only way we’ll be able to remain faithful, then, is if we’re regularly traveling down the path of fidelity, the path of self-denial out of love for and affirmation of Jesus. And if we remain faithful in this way, then we will save our life forever, we will be glorified with Jesus forever.
- That’s the application of today’s Gospel to our discipleship, to our own personal following of Jesus. But there’s always an application as well to our apostles, to our being fishers of men as priests and deacons, to our carrying out the new evangelization and bringing others to the Lord.
- So many today, like the Greeks in the Gospel, still want to see Jesus. They look to those in the Church, like the Greeks looked to Philip, to try to bring them to Jesus. And we need to be ready not only to assist them in coming to Jesus but as a community we have a duty to help them find the face of Jesus when they come. The reason why we need a missionary metamorphosis of the Church is because, as we talked about on Friday night in the first conference, there are many areas in which the Church needs much

improvement in bringing people to Jesus. Pope Francis said that the greatest reform the Church needs to stop caring for those who are already in some relationship with Jesus but to go out to help those who haven't yet really found him or who make not explicitly be seeing his face to help them to see that Jesus has never stopped keeping his eyes on them. The Church needs to overcome ecclesial introversion to help all those seeking Jesus. Let's see a few ways we need to help people find Jesus and on which many of us need to improve.

- First, there are many who are longing for Jesus but they don't find him where they should: they don't find him in the Catholics they know, or in the Catholic Churches they visit. There's the famous saying of Mahatma Gandhi, the great non-violent liberator of India. He was always fascinated by Jesus, whom he said taught like no one else. He would quote the words of Christ, especially from the Sermon on the Mount, very often. Once a missionary, E. Stanley Jones, asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is it that you appear so adamantly to reject becoming his follower?" Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject Christ! I love Christ! It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ. If Christians would really live according to the teaching of Christ, as found in the Bible, all of India would be Christian today." These are stunning words. Friedrich Nietzsche, who coined the phrase "God is dead and if he weren't we'd have to kill him," and whose thoughts were one of the seeds of Nazism, said something far more severe: "I may have been able to believe in a Redeemer, if I had ever met someone redeemed!" The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) pondered this point when it said, "Believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion."
- Second, people who are searching for Jesus come to the places where they legitimately believe they should be able to find him, but often are terribly disappointed. They don't find him there. They expect, for example, that when they come to a Catholic Church in general and to Catholic clerics in particular, they're going to find people who believe in what Jesus taught, for example, that man doesn't live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. They expect that they're going to have people who live knowing that Jesus has the words of eternal life, that people are going to be in love for the word of God, not just to hear it, but to know it and to live it. They expect they'll find ministers who are on fire. They expect people who are on fire. They expect that they're going to be surrounded by others who believe they see Jesus and hear him in the words they give. Yet, this is not the reality everywhere. One of the reasons why so many of those who go to storefront Pentecostal Churches are ex-Catholics is because they expected to find a real love of the Word of God in Catholic Churches, but in many places it wasn't their experience.
- Third, they also expect, when they come to Catholic Churches and clerics, that they're going to find people who are the most joyous on earth, who rejoice to be in the presence of God, who know how blessed they are to be called to the supper of the Lord. They expect to see incredible reverence for God who comes down from heaven to earth and hides himself humbly under the appearances of simple bread and wine. They expect to find people who are giving their best in terms of prayer and singing, who are wearing their best, who are behaving the best. They expect to find people who center their lives on Jesus in the Eucharist as the source and summit of their life, who order their entire life around the celebration of Mass rather than just try to squeeze it in, when they can, as quickly as they can. And, yet, when they come to various Churches, that's not their experience. They often find people who are anything but rejoicing, who give no real sense of being conscious of the reality of God's presence, who seem to be fulfilling burdensome religious duties rather than acting out of enormous gratitude, love and joy. It makes it so much harder for them to see Jesus when it seems like Catholics don't see Jesus even in the Eucharist.
- Fourth, they also expect, when they come to Catholic Churches, that they're going to encounter love, love for each other, love for them, love for others. Jesus, after all, instructed Christians to love others as he has loved them, and they anticipate that Catholics are going to be acting on this first and greatest commandment of all, that not only are people loving God with all their hearts, minds, souls and strength, but that they're loving others with the same total commitment. They expect that they're going to find a community where the people really love each other in a palpable way, where not only everyone knows

everyone other's names, but where they care for each other, cheer each other up when they're down or suffering, help each other when they're struggling, pray for each other, and enjoy each other's company. They expect that the Catholics they meet are going to give all they've got to care for those in need, through support for the missions, through food pantries, St. Vincent de Paul Societies, Catholic Charities and other outreaches, through the corporal and especially spiritual works of mercy, passing on the faith to others with zeal as the greatest good. They also expect — and deep down desire — that others are going to look at them with the eyes of Jesus, warmly embrace them into the community, help them to feel truly at home in God's house, take an interest in them, and seek to help them become better friends with Jesus and all Jesus' friends. In short, they expect to see and find Jesus acting in his mystical body the Church, which continues to follow the path of the grain of wheat together with the Lord. When they find it, they begin to try to make up for lost time. When they don't find it, they become spiritually disoriented and look elsewhere.

- The challenge for us in our ministries and in our parishes is to be able to help people find Jesus whom they have been made to wish to see. People who come to our Churches may comment on the artistic, architectural and musical beauty they find, but we want them to see an even more important beauty, a beauty of people who love the Lord, who love each other and even strangers with the Lord's own love, who are losing their lives out of authentic sacrificial love for God and others, who are growing in holiness and excited to be joined on that exodus. In short they want to discover that God lives in the Church, that it's not a religious museum but a house of prayer, a real home of love, in which those here totally identify with Christ and seek to carry on his work with the fire of the Holy Spirit. All of us have got a crucial role to play in responding to God's ever-present help to make our parishes, institutions and homes like the early Church that, filled with the Holy Spirit, was devoted to the apostles' teaching, to communion, to the breaking of the Bread and prayers, that was together and had all things in common. About that community, St. Luke tells us, the Lord "added to their number day by day those who were being saved." The same fruitfulness can be repeated if we go the way of the grain of wheat and allow the life of Christ to come alive in us. God the Father thundered to Jesus at the end of today's Gospel that he had glorified his name would glorify it again. The first glorification was in Jesus and the second glorification was us. And the glory of God, as St. Irenaeus told us in 198, is man fully alive. *Gloria Dei vivens homo*, he said. And we come fully alive by going the path of the grain of wheat, following Jesus along the path of self-giving sacrificial love as we come alive with the life he came into our world to give us to the full.
- This retreat has been a time to rededicate ourselves to this work of following Jesus down the exodus from focusing on ourselves to focusing on him and others; to focus on the mission of spreading the Gospel of Joy and the Joy of the Gospel; to focus on helping people follow us to encounter Christ in his mercy; to ponder our call to become Good Samaritans so that people will see in us the love of Christ for them; to preach in such a way that they get a sense that Jesus is with them; to center ourselves on the source and the summit of our faith, Christ in the Eucharist, and help others to become transformed by him.
- That mention of the Eucharist can lead us to our last thought The greatest way of all we find Jesus in this world is in his real presence in the Holy Eucharist. He is the grain of wheat who dies, but from that lifeless grain that fellow along the way of the Cross has come forth the great multiplication of the Bread of Life that will endure until the end of time. Jesus in the Eucharist will satisfy superabundantly the hunger of all humanity that longs not just to see God's face but to become one with him in love. It's here that Jesus, who gave his body and blood when he was lifted on the Cross, continues to be elevated and continues to give that body and blood for the world, while inviting us to do this in memory of him and follow him down the path of self-giving love for our and others' salvation. He said that when he is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. It's to this elevation of him in the host that he draws us and others. We wish to see Jesus and here Jesus comes to see us, feed us and send us forth as grains of wheat to be planted throughout the world, so that we, by our true Christian love, may become his face, his hands, his feet, his heart in the world, to draw everyone onto his path, the path of the exodus that will lead to life eternal. This is, as Pope Benedict tells us, the essence of love and indeed of human life itself.