

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE**  
**APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**  
**SATURDAY OF THE TWENTY-THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME**  
**MEMORIAL OF THE HOLY NAME OF MARY**  
**RELIGIOUS SISTERS OF MERCY OF ALMA**  
**OUR LADY OF GRACE CHAPEL, ALMA, MICHIGAN**  
**SEPTEMBER 12, 2020**

*A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit.* These opening words of today's Gospel from St. Luke remind us of the need to be fruitful even as consecrated person. It is all the more fitting as we celebrate the memorial of the Holy Name of Mary, for while remaining a Virgin, she bore fruit which gave life to the whole world.

St. Anthony of Padua, reflecting on Matthew's parallel (Mt 7:17), which reads, "*Every good tree brings forth good fruit and an evil tree brings forth evil fruit,*" interprets the passage in a moral sense, noting that "a good tree consists of five things: roots, trunk, branches, leaves and fruit.... Naturalists tell us that the height of the tree corresponds to the depth of its roots.... A good tree symbolizes good will, which in order to last and be good, must also possess five things: first, the roots of humility, a trunk of obedience, branches of charity, leaves of holy preaching, and fruit of contemplation." (ANTHONY OF PADUA, SERMON FOR THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST)

Conversely, a short tree, one that does not reach to the heavens, lacks these qualities. Let us contemplate the good tree and its qualities, including the good fruit.

***The Roots of Humility.*** Anthony says that "the deeper the roots of humility are imbedded in the heart; the higher will rise the tree of good work. ... Blessed indeed is that tree which has such roots, because it is from the roots that the tree bears fruit. The roots are symbols of humility because it springs up from good will in consequence of which a person will receive the fruit of eternal life."

The word *humility* comes from *humus*, which means earth or ground. To be humble is to be conscious of one's lowly rank. Anthony explains: "*What a person is before God, that he is and no more.*" This is a precise definition of humility.

This was the disposition of the Blessed Virgin who referred to herself as the *lowly handmaiden of the Lord*. Similarly, St. Therese did not seek to exalt herself, rather she sought to be childlike, desiring to be pleasing in the sight of God.

"*What a person is before God, that he is and no more.*" In the Father's sight, we discover our identity, as the Virgin did, in truth and without pretense, to arrive at a true estimate of self and admitting our utter dependence on Him is the determining factor.

A chief barrier to humility is pride. How does one overcome this? Saint Gregory the Great recalls Benedict's experience at Subiaco, when the devil tempted him to pride after the people there greatly esteemed him. Scorning worldly acclamations, Benedict fled to his cave to pray and to be alone with God. In prayer, self-denial, not so much renunciation of affections, as renunciation of self-will, is necessary to cultivate humility.

***The Trunk of Obedience.*** If humility forms the roots of the tree, obedience – deriving from *obaudientia* – to pay attention or to listen – forms the trunk. Obedience is the "strong" trunk that supports the branches, its leaves, and its fruits.

Obedience is a moral virtue by which we submit to legitimate authority and by which we are inclined to comply with the will of authority, even before a specific command is given or a reward is promised. Consider Jesus' obedience at the home in Nazareth or at Calvary, where He was "*obedient unto death, death on a cross.*" (Phil 2:8)

At the Last Supper when Jesus spoke of obedience, He did so in the context of love: "*This is my commandment – love one another as I have loved you. Greater love than this no one has – to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.*" (John 15: 12-14) Obedience is not a blind following but proceeds from love. Without love, obedience becomes slavish. Jesus said, "*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, as I have kept my Father's commandments.*" (John 15: 9-10) Obedience begins with abiding, listening and love.

**The Branches of Charity.** Rooted in humility and grafted on to the trunk of obedience, the tree stretches forth its branches – the branches of charity. Once one no longer thinks about one's own will, growth in charity begins. Love is about willing what is truly good for our neighbor.

The parable of the Rich Young Man (Mark 10:17-22) demonstrates a barrier to growth in charity – worldly attachment. Obedience to the commandments is not enough for true joy. The rich young man has kept the commandments. He did his duty, yet his heart longs for more. What more must he do? He must sell his possessions and follow. His face falls. Positively, his sadness offers hope for conversion – for eventual following. Negatively, his worldly comforts keep him from the radical charity that Gospel discipleship demands and from the experience of the deeper love Jesus offers.

The life of the evangelical counsels, including the vow of poverty, helps us to discover that true riches rely in the love of Christ who made us rich through his poverty. Saint Alphonsus reminds us: "To desire Paradise in order to possess God and to love Him better is true and perfect charity; for eternal glory is the consummation of love. The soul, entirely forgetful of herself, and divested of all self-love, loves God with all her strength, and with a most pure love." (ALPHONSUS LIGUORI, THE TRUE SPOUSE OF JESUS CHRIST)

**The Leaves of Holy Preaching** From the branches of charity grow the leaves – the leaves of holy preaching. Generally, religious are filled with charity, putting their lives at the service of God and the Church. While charity is a virtue, so too is receptivity. Pope Benedict writes:

...man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give; he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. Jn 7:37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is from Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God. (BENEDICT XVI, ENCYCLICAL LETTER *DEUS CARITAS EST*, 25 DECEMBER 2005, 7)

One of God's many gifts is His Word that comes to us in the Scriptures, in preaching, or in words of exhortation from members of our community. How do we use our speech?

Take a moment and listen to these lines of Scripture from the letter of St. James: "*Let every good man be slow to speak.*" – James 1:19; "*The tongue, which no one can tame, is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.*" – James 3:8; "*If a man who does not control his tongue imagines that he is religious, he is self-deceived; his worship is pointless.*" – James 1:26

Why God has given us our mouths? To sing His praises. To offer a word of compassion. To forgive. To build up His Church. If we cannot use our tongues for good, then let us remain silent, for this, at least, allows us to assume a posture of humble receptivity before the Word.

***The Fruit of Contemplation*** “*Every tree is known by its fruit.*” Humble receptivity is critical for yielding the fruit of contemplation. If we are humble, obedient, filled with charity, and use our speech rightly, we will grow toward the heights of heaven – communion with God. While here below, we need, following the example of the Beloved Son, to be alone with the Father, coming to know the One in whom the heart discovers true joy. This means commitment to prayer.

Prayer, Saint Alphonsus says, is “nothing more than conversation between God and the soul in which the soul pours forth its affections, desires, fears, and petitions, and God speaks to the heart, causing it to know His goodness, and the love which He bears it, and what it must do to please him.” (ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI, *THE WAY OF SALVATION AND PERFECTION IN THE COMPLETE WORKS OF ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI*, ED. EUGENE GRIMM, VOL. 2, (NEW YORK: REDEMPTORIST FATHERS, 1886-94; REPRINT ED., BROOKLYN, 1927) 219.

Sometimes we pray well. Other times, dryness abounds. Either way it is important to give God what we can – our time and our hearts, and let Him do the rest. In this, we are offering Him the fruits, the first fruits, of our lives. At times in the conversation, when one simply cannot find the words, perhaps God is trying to remind the soul of the need to listen *and* receive.

Receptivity is a hallmark of contemplation as Alphonsus indicates: “While in meditation, a person goes out in search of God through the effort of reasoning. In contemplation, he gazes upon God Who has been found. In meditation a person acts through the operations of his own faculties. In contemplation, God acts and the soul is acted upon, receiving the gifts infused into it by grace. The very light and the divine love which fill it make it lovingly intent upon contemplating God’s goodness.” (ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI, *PRAXIS CONFESSARII IN THEOLOGIA MORALIS*, VOL. 4, ED. LEONARDO GAUDÉ (ROME: TYPIS POLYGLOTTIS VATICANIS, 1912), CAP. IX, § 2, N. 126.)

Contemplation is that awareness of being in the presence of the One who loves you and Whom you love. When there is an awareness of being in the presence of a loved one, there is a feeling of being one with that person. Love demands union with the beloved, and this love fills the heart with joy.

“*Every good tree brings forth good fruit and an evil tree brings forth evil fruit...* A good tree is a symbol of the righteous person who, in order to be good, must also possess five things: first, the roots of humility, a trunk of obedience, branches of charity, leaves of holy preaching, and fruit of contemplation.”

*Every tree is known by its fruit.* Therefore, Sisters, go and bear fruit that will last.