

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In this noble cathedral I rejoice to greet my brother Bishops and priests, and the deacons, religious and laity of the Archdiocese of Sydney. In a very special way, my greeting goes to the seminarians and young religious who are present among us. Like the young Israelites in today's first reading, they are a sign of hope and renewal for God's people; and, like those young Israelites, they will have the task of building up the Lord's house in the coming generation. As we admire this magnificent edifice, how can we not think of all those ranks of priests, religious and faithful laity who, each in his or her own way, contributed to the building up of the Church in Australia? Our thoughts turn in particular to those settler families to whom Father Jeremiah O'Flynn entrusted the Blessed Sacrament at his departure, a "small flock" which cherished and preserved that precious treasure, passing it on to the succeeding generations who raised this great tabernacle to the glory of God. Let us rejoice in their fidelity and perseverance, and dedicate ourselves to carrying on their labours for the spread of the Gospel, the conversion of hearts and the growth of the Church in holiness, unity and charity!

We are about to celebrate the dedication of the new altar of this venerable cathedral. As its sculpted frontal powerfully reminds us, every altar is a symbol of Jesus Christ, present in the midst of his Church as priest, altar and victim (cf. *Preface of Easter V*). Crucified, buried and raised from the dead, given life in the Spirit and seated at the right hand of the Father, Christ has become our great high priest, eternally making intercession for us. In the Church's liturgy, and above all in the sacrifice of the Mass consummated on the altars of the world, he invites us, the members of his mystical Body, to share in his self-oblation. He calls us, as the priestly people of the new and eternal covenant, to offer, in union with him, our own daily sacrifices for the salvation of the world.

In today's liturgy the Church reminds us that, like this altar, we too have been consecrated, set "apart" for the service of God and the building up of his Kingdom. All too often, however, we find ourselves immersed in a world that would set God "aside". In the name of human freedom and autonomy, God's name is passed over in silence, religion is reduced to private devotion, and faith is shunned in the public square. At times this mentality, so completely at odds with the core of the Gospel, can even cloud our own understanding of the Church and her mission. We too can be tempted to make the life of faith a matter of mere sentiment, thus blunting its power to inspire a consistent vision of the world and a rigorous dialogue with the many other visions competing for the minds and hearts of our contemporaries.

Yet history, including the history of our own time, shows that the question of God will never be silenced, and that indifference to the religious dimension of human existence ultimately diminishes and betrays man himself. Is that not the message which is proclaimed by the magnificent architecture of this cathedral? Is that not the mystery of faith which will be proclaimed from this altar at every celebration of the Eucharist? Faith teaches us that in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, we come to understand the grandeur of our own humanity, the mystery of our life on this earth, and the sublime destiny which awaits us in heaven (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24). Faith teaches us that we are God's creatures, made in his image and likeness, endowed with an inviolable dignity, and called to eternal life. Wherever man is diminished, the world around us is also diminished; it loses its ultimate meaning and strays from its goal. What emerges is a culture, not of life, but of death. How could this be considered "progress"? It is a backward step, a form of regression which ultimately dries up the very sources of life for individuals and all of society.

We know that in the end – as Saint Ignatius of Loyola saw so clearly – the only real "standard" against which all human reality can be measured is the Cross and its message of an unmerited love which triumphs over evil, sin and death, creating new life and unfading joy. The Cross reveals that we find ourselves only by giving our lives away, receiving God's love as an unmerited gift and working to draw all men and women into the beauty of that love and the light of the truth which alone brings salvation to the world.

It is in this truth – this mystery of faith – that we have been "consecrated" (cf. *Jn* 17:17-19), and it is in this truth that we are called to grow, with the help of God's grace, in daily fidelity to his word, within the life-giving communion of the Church. Yet how difficult is this path of consecration! It demands continual "conversion", a sacrificial death to self which is the condition for belonging fully to God, a change of mind and heart which brings true freedom and a new breadth of vision. Today's liturgy offers an eloquent symbol of that progressive spiritual transformation to which each of us is called. From the sprinkling of water, the proclamation of God's word and the invocation of all the saints, to the prayer of consecration, the anointing and washing of the altar, its being clothed in white and apparelled in light – all these rites invite us to re-live our own consecration in Baptism. They invite us to reject sin and its false allure, and to drink ever more deeply from the life-giving springs of God's grace.

Dear friends, may this celebration, in the presence of the Successor of Peter, be a moment of rededication and renewal for the whole Church in Australia! Here I would like to pause to acknowledge the shame which we have all felt as a result of the sexual abuse of minors by some clergy and religious in this country. These misdeeds, which constitute so grave a betrayal of trust, deserve unequivocal condemnation. They have caused great pain and have damaged the Church's witness. I ask all of you to support and assist your Bishops, and to work together with them in combating this evil. Victims should receive compassion and care, and those responsible for these evils must be brought to justice. It is an urgent priority to promote a safer and more wholesome environment, especially for young people. In these days marked by the celebration of World Youth Day, we are reminded of how precious a treasure has been entrusted to us in our young people, and how great a part of the Church's mission in this country has been dedicated to their education and care. As the Church in Australia continues, in the spirit of the Gospel, to address effectively this serious pastoral challenge, I join you in praying that this time of purification will bring about healing, reconciliation and ever greater fidelity to the moral demands of the Gospel.

I wish now to turn to the seminarians and young religious in our midst, with a special word of affection and encouragement. Dear friends: with great generosity you have set out on a particular path of consecration, grounded in your Baptism and undertaken in response to the Lord's personal call. You have committed yourselves, in different ways, to accepting Christ's invitation to follow him, to leave all behind, and to devote your lives to the pursuit of holiness and the service of his people.

In today's Gospel, the Lord calls us to "believe in the light" (*Jn* 12:36). These words have a special meaning for you, dear young seminarians and religious. They are a summons to trust in the truth of God's word and to hope firmly in his promises. They invite us to see, with the eyes of faith, the infallible working of his grace all around us, even in those dark times when all our efforts seem to be in vain. Let this altar, with its powerful image of Christ the Suffering Servant, be a constant inspiration to you. Certainly there are times when every faithful disciple will feel the heat and the burden of the day (cf. *Mt* 20:12), and the struggle of bearing prophetic witness before a world which can appear deaf to the demands of God's word. Do not be afraid! Believe in the light! Take to heart the truth which we have heard in today's second reading: "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever" (*Heb* 13:8). The light of Easter continues to dispel the darkness!

The Lord also calls us to walk in the light (cf. *Jn* 12:35). Each of you has embarked on the greatest and the most glorious of all struggles, to be consecrated in truth, to grow in virtue, to achieve harmony between your thoughts and ideals, and your words and actions. Enter sincerely and deeply into the discipline and spirit of your programmes of formation. Walk in Christ's light daily through fidelity to personal and liturgical prayer, nourished by meditation on the inspired word of God. The Fathers of the Church loved to see the Scriptures as a spiritual Eden, a garden where we can walk freely with God, admiring the beauty and harmony of his saving plan as it bears fruit in our own lives, in the life of the Church and in all of history. Let prayer, then, and meditation on God's word, be the lamp which illumines, purifies and guides your steps along the path which the Lord has marked out for you. Make the daily celebration of the Eucharist the centre of your life. At each Mass, when the Lord's Body and Blood are lifted up at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, lift up your own hearts and lives, through Christ, with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, as a loving sacrifice to God our Father.

In this way, dear young seminarians and religious, you yourselves will become living altars, where Christ's sacrificial love is made present as an inspiration and a source of spiritual nourishment to everyone you meet. By embracing the Lord's call to follow him in chastity, poverty and obedience, you have begun a journey of radical discipleship which will make you "signs of contradiction" (cf. *Lk* 2:34) to many of your contemporaries. Model your lives daily on the Lord's own loving self-oblation in obedience to the will of the Father. You will then discover the freedom and joy which can draw others to the Love which lies beyond all other loves as their source and their ultimate fulfilment. Never forget that celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom means embracing a life completely devoted to love, a love that enables you to commit yourselves fully to God's service and to be totally present to your brothers and sisters, especially those in need. The greatest treasures that you share with other young people – your idealism, your generosity, your time and energy – these are the very sacrifices which you are placing upon the Lord's altar. May you always cherish this beautiful charism which God has given you for his glory and the building up of the Church!

Dear friends, let me conclude these reflections by drawing your attention to the great stained glass window in the chancel of this cathedral. There Our Lady, Queen of Heaven, is represented enthroned in majesty beside her divine Son. The artist has represented Mary, as the new Eve, offering an apple to Christ, the new Adam. This gesture symbolizes her reversal of our

first parents' disobedience, the rich fruit which God's grace bore in her own life, and the first fruits of that redeemed and glorified humanity which she has preceded into the glory of heaven. Let us ask Mary, Help of Christians, to sustain the Church in Australia in fidelity to that grace by which the Crucified Lord even now "draws to himself" all creation and every human heart (cf. *Jn* 12:32). May the power of his Holy Spirit consecrate the faithful of this land in truth, and bring forth abundant fruits of holiness and justice for the redemption of the world. May it guide all humanity into the fullness of life around that Altar, where, in the glory of the heavenly liturgy, we are called to sing God's praises for ever. Amen.

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