

Order of Malta  
Investiture Mass  
Cathedral of Saint Matthew the Apostle  
Washington, D.C.  
Saturday, October 21, 2017  
10:00 a.m.

Homily

by

His Eminence Cardinal Donald Wuerl  
Archbishop of Washington

Your Excellency, the Apostolic Nuncio, my brother bishops, the prelate of the Sovereign Order of Malta, brother priests, deacons, religious, distinguished members of the Order of Malta, especially those being invested into the Order, dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome all of you to the Archdiocese of Washington, to the Cathedral of Saint Matthew the Apostle, and this Mass of Investiture of new members of the Order of Malta.

This is always an occasion of joy for me because it recognizes the commitment of the Order of Malta and particularly those newly invested to the service of Christ as he lives in his new Body, the Church. For me, the presence of so many bishops bears witness with you to the significant relationship of the Order of Malta to the Church and especially to our Holy Father Pope Francis, and the service you provide not just as faithful followers of Jesus and members of the Church but specifically and precisely as Knights and Dames of Malta.

Both of the readings selected for today help us to reflect more deeply on the meaning of this investiture ceremony and on the Order of Malta itself.

The first reading, taken from Paul to the Ephesians, describes the clothing of the Knights, most particularly the armor of faith. It is not just that we put on the insignia of the Order, we do so as a testimony to the faith that it proclaims.

The Gospel from Saint Matthew proclaims that the foundation of our house, if it is to withstand the storms of our day, the secularism and relativism of our age, must stand firmly on our faith.

This imagery of the storms lashing at buildings that try to withstand the waves and wind recalls for us our recent experience of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Jose and Maria, and the devastation left in their wake, especially in areas where the structures were so flimsy.

Jesus uses that experience – storms, dwellings and foundations – to help us see the importance of our faith.

The Gospel for today tells us that our lives must rest on the firm foundation of faith in Christ and that it is in living that faith that we strive to enter the kingdom of heaven.

But Jesus reminds us that this is not an easy task today any more than it ever was in the Church. The challenges are all around us. The voices of alternate lifestyles and a secular vision of reality challenges each one of us every day. What the Gospel tells us is that we must listen to Jesus' Words, make them our own and then we and our community, our society, our culture will be able to withstand any of the rains and floods and winds and storms of the challenges to our faith and the Gospel way of life.

I want to reflect with you on two elements this morning, both of them found in the Gospel we just listened to, our need to be open to God's Word and our effort always to be faithful to it. Both of these elements are characteristics of the Order of Malta – the Knights and Dames of Malta. At the heart of what we today describe as Christian chivalry is the commitment to hear God's Word as it is proclaimed in his Church and then to bear witness to it.

In its own way, the Order of Malta does this precisely by its defense of the faith and care for the less fortunate. Today, the Knights of Malta protect the faith by bearing public witness to it, its truth and its place in our society. The time-honored care for the less fortunate is beautifully visible in the commitment of the Knights of Malta to the malades.

I also want to touch on a third point and reflect that this Investiture Mass is taking place in a new moment of renewal in the life of the Church.

The wider context of this new moment is the New Evangelization that we have all become so familiar with and today this is all the more our challenge as Pope Francis calls for us to go out, to encounter, to engage, and to accompany those who should be with us and are not, or who once were and need to be invited back.

## GOD'S MERCY AND OUR CONSCIENCE

For the Holy Father the pastoral mission of the Church, focused on the lived expression of mercy and love and the significance of conscience in our moral life, is founded on four principle activities: listening, accompanying, discerning, and evangelizing.

These actions of the evangelizing disciple are highlighted in the recent apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, *The Joy of Love*. This teaching document has drawn considerable attention precisely because it asks us to move beyond just repeating the teaching of the Church to the fuller task of helping others come to accept and live it.

One can say that *Amoris Laetitia* is itself the fruit of very intensive LISTENING on the part of Pope Francis. The two synods on family called by the Holy Father were themselves preceded by consultation of local churches throughout the world on the lived situation of families, their challenges, and their experience. The Extraordinary Synod of 2014 prepared the agenda for the 2015 general assembly. Pope Francis modeled this listening activity by his attentive presence in the Synod assembly hall. Indeed, he comments on this experience at the outset of the apostolic exhortation (7).

Pope Francis understands this process of listening to the faithful and to his brother bishops to be a key part of his own teaching and pastoral ministry. It is part of the “synodality” or “journeying together” which he sees as essential to the Church at every level. <sup>1</sup> The fruit of this listening is reflected in the generous citation and engagement of the reports of the two synods in this Exhortation.

The second activity on which the document focuses is ACCOMPANYING, the pastoral accompaniment of all who seek to find a way closer to God. In many ways this is an extension of listening and of the synodality to which it gives rise. The journeying together of all of the members of the Church implies this accompaniment. But it also calls for a change in pastoral style and intensity.

The action of accompanying has special significance for our parish life and all of its various manifestations. It is in this personal contact that renewal of interest and re-awakening of faith can take place.

Pope Francis calls pastors to do more than teach the Church’s doctrine—though they clearly must do that. Pastors must “take on the ‘smell of the sheep’ whom they serve so that ‘the sheep are willing to hear their voice’ (EG, no. 24). This requires a more careful and intensive formation of all who minister – all who invite people to renew their faith. The many manifestations of parish ministry, in this view, take on the dimension of both invitation and listening.

The Church’s pastoral ministry is intended to help the faithful to grow in the art of DISCERNING. A key part of discernment is the formation of conscience. The Holy Father insists that the Church’s pastors must “make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (AL, no. 37).

Part of this formation is presenting the teaching of the Church in its fullness and without compromise (cf. AL, no. 307) though in language which is welcoming rather than defensive or one-sided (cf. AL, nos. 36, 38).

Pope Francis further elaborates Saint John Paul II’s distinction in *Familiaris consortio* between the law of gradualness and the gradualness of the law. The “law of gradualness” refers to the progressive nature of conversion, enabling a person to grow in holiness in living out their faith convictions. When they fall short they need to return to the mercy of God poured out in the cross of Christ and made accessible in the sacraments of the Church. The “gradualness of the law” on the other hand, is the erroneous idea that there are “different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situations” (*Familiaris consortio*, no. 34).

Even in the midst of our challenges and imperfections, we are called to respond to the Holy Spirit’s promptings to grow more fully in the Gospel mandate, not emptying it of its meaning.

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Admittedly, this individual process of discernment may not be easy. A person may know full well Church teaching, Pope Francis notes, yet have great difficulty in either understanding its inherent positive value, or in being able to fully embrace it right away because of circumstances (*Amoris Laetitia*, 301). Yet, the underlying moral principle which should inform both that personal discernment and the priest's ministry is that a person whose situation in life is objectively contrary to moral teaching can still love and grow in the faith, he or she can still take steps in the right direction and benefit from God's mercy and grace while receiving the assistance of the Church (*Amoris Laetitia*, 305).

*Amoris Laetitia* is not a list of answers to each individual human issue. Rather, it is a call to compassionate accompaniment in helping all to experience Christ's love and mercy. To the extent that our ministry does this, it is also an EVANGELIZING action. As we recall the challenge to go out, to encounter, and to accompany, we also recognize that this is at its heart an act of the evangelizing disciple.

In the action of going, encountering, sharing and accompanying, we also recognize that in the journey we, ourselves, are also drawing closer to the Lord. In all of our action of evangelizing, teaching, catechizing, counseling, admonishing, instructing, we also remember both God's liberating truth and saving mercy. None of us can claim yet to be perfect as is our heavenly Father. But we can grow closer to the Lord who will by his grace heal us so that we can have the life he wants for us.

## THEOLOGICAL BUILDING BLOCKS

The very first thing we need to recognize is that there does exist a great difference in our world, our society today between and among those who would accept the Gospel and its values, and those who have chosen another pathway through life. Before we can hope to be secure in our own faith and with confidence to live and defend it, we need to recognize that not every value proposed today necessarily corresponds to God's revealed plan and Jesus' Gospel.

Perhaps sometimes we can be so persuaded by the ever-present voices of the secularized world, the voices of the media, blogs, commentators, that we may fail to even see the difference – or, worse yet, begin to doubt that we do have the words of everlasting life.

I think we are all aware of new terminology in our culture today. We hear of “false news” and “fake news.” The terminology may be new; the problem is an old one.

As we look to the issues of our day and seek (as evangelizing disciples) to prepare ourselves and others to better understand the uniqueness of our proclamation, so we can build on solid rock not sand, there are a number of questions we need to be able to answer correctly, even if this morning's newspaper or last evening's broadcast news would reject our responses. Among the most significant of these today, precisely because they are so challenged, and because the answers become those foundation blocks of our faith, would include:

the Anthropological: what does it mean to be human – created in the image and likeness of God?

the Christological: what does it mean to be a Christian?

the Ecclesiological: what does it mean to be a member of the Church? and

the Soterological: what do we mean by the Kingdom of God?

Our answers become the foundation blocks of today's Gospel that allows our house, our values, our way of life to withstand the rains, and winds and floods of political correctness, popular opinion or the persuasion of polls, the voices of some blogs.

Let us look briefly at these foundational questions. The first, "What does it mean to be human?"

Human beings, made male and female, are created in the image and likeness of the Triune God. We are made to live in relationship and community. There exists a true created moral order to life. We are not to kill, commit adultery, bear false witness or take what is not ours.

Thus, the defender of the faith, the disciple, who builds on solid rock, must recognize the dignity of each human person.

The fact that each person is created in the image and likeness of God forms the basis for declaring, for example, the universality of human rights and the harmony that should exist among peoples. Our faith allows us to speak with conviction to a doubting civil society about the truth and integrity of realities such as marriage, family, the natural moral order, objective right and wrong, and the value and dignity of all human life from conception to natural death.

The second rock of our faith structure is the Christological Foundation. The answer to the question, what does it mean to be a Christian?

"Who do you say that I am?" asked Jesus. Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:13-16).

For the disciple this is a time to confidently recognize Christ, the center of our faith – who Christ is, his relationship to the Father, his divinity and humanity, the reality of his death and Resurrection, and his sending of the Holy Spirit. We are summoned to stand as one with Peter and, like him, profess that Jesus is Lord.

Every Knight and Dame of Malta wears a cross. Those who step forward today are invested with a cross. It is a reminder that we have already been baptized into Christ and signed with his cross. Our task is to grow ever more fully and deeply into life in Christ.

The Gospel that Jesus Christ came to reveal is not information about God, but rather God himself in our midst. God made himself visible, audible, tangible. In return, he seeks our love. Pope Benedict put it this way: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (Deus Caritas Est, 1).

We look at the Cross we bear that we received in this Investiture Mass, and say with our hearts, in our minds, and on our lips:

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

When our Lord first came among us, he offered a new way of living. This brings us to the third rock of our solid foundation – the Ecclesiological Foundation stone. Here we answer the question, why is it important to be a member of the Church?

The Church is not just one way among many to reach God, all of them equally valid. While the Lord does wish all to be saved, he specifically established the Church to continue his living and saving presence. The Church, a people gathered into the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, as a sacrament – a sign and instrument – of communion with God and of unity among all people (cf. Lumen Gentium, 1).

Our understanding of the nature and significance of the Church explains why the missionary activity of the Church is essential to her identity. Essential to the mission of the Church is the work of bringing every individual into communion with the divine persons revealed in Jesus Christ.

Today we must realize that the missionary activity of the Church is directed also to people who live next door to us or who should be with us at parish Sunday Mass and are not.

Now we come to the last of our four building blocks to weather the winds and floods of temptations to doubt and unbelief. The Soterological Foundation helps us answer the question, what do we mean by the Kingdom of God? Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand. This was his message. He was telling us that God’s presence, his realm, is actually being made present in us now. The Father’s loving mercy, Jesus’s forgiveness of sin and the Holy Spirit’s new life is supposed to be manifest in our works of compassion, mercy, truth, goodness, kindness, peace and love.

Our goal in life is to make our way to the glory of the fullness of the kingdom – heaven. But we are charged as disciples to begin to manifest that kingdom here and now. Even though it is unfashionable to do so, we must speak the truth regarding death, judgment after death, with the possibility of hell, as well as the truth of heaven through redemption in Christ. God sent his Son into this world to offer us forgiveness of sin and new life.

At the conclusion of the 2015 Synod on the Family, one of the priest delegates invited by Pope Francis gave a beautiful intervention with this memorable reminder: When the love of God that brought all things into being encounters the human condition that we have created, the love of God becomes the mercy of God.

As we talk about bringing renewed energy to our efforts, particularly in the light of the example and focus of Pope Francis, I think it is worthwhile concluding with a description of some of qualities of the evangelizing disciple.

### QUALITIES OF THE EVANGELIZER

The evangelizing disciple has to have a number of unique characteristics. I would list here four that stand out: boldness or courage, connectedness to the Church, a sense of urgency, and joy.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the word that describes the Apostles after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is “bold.” Peter boldly stands up and preaches the Good News of the Resurrection. Paul boldly announces the Word in frenetic movement around the world. Today, the New Evangelization must show a similar boldness born of confidence in Christ. We cannot be lukewarm, but must be on fire with the Spirit. Other examples abound: Saint Thomas More, Saint Maximilian Kolbe, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, Blessed Miguel Pro, and the various martyrs and missionary saints.

The evangelizing disciples also need a connectedness with the one Church, her one Gospel and her pastoral presence. The authentication of our message of everlasting life depends on our communion with the Church and solidarity with her pastors.

Another needed quality is a sense of urgency. It is our turn now. We see in Mary’s Visitation to Elizabeth how the Gospel recounts that Mary set off in haste on a long and difficult journey. There is no time to be lost because the mission is so important.

Finally, when we look around and see the vast field waiting for us to sow seeds of new life, we must do so with joy. Our message should be one that inspires others to follow us along the path to the kingdom of God. Ours is a message to Rejoice! Christ is risen, Christ is with us!

### CONCLUSION

This is a new moment in the life of the Church, a new Pentecost. It is our turn now. We are called to reinvigorate our faith, not only today in this Year of Mercy, but every day and every year, and to share it with others.

Dear brothers and sisters, what we have here is only the beginning, a manifestation of what will come in fullness, in glory. As part of the effort to realize now the beginnings of that realm of everlasting life we are called to now do the works of mercy, compassion, truth, peace and love that will reach completion when Christ comes with his angels to claim his own.

We must always be open to the gift of the Spirit. It is the movement of the Spirit that has led us along this path, it is the nudging of the Spirit that brings us to this moment and it is in the outpouring of the Spirit that we will continue to walk united with Christ at the service of his Bride the Church.

When we receive the cross and wear the cross, we remind ourselves who we are and what it means to be a Knight and Dame of Malta, someone who stands firmly on the foundation of our understanding of who we are, what it means to be a Christian and a member of the Church, and how we participate in the glorious work of manifesting God's kingdom.

It is our turn in the long history of the Church simply to believe, to say and to live the announcement: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

October 23, 2017