

A GREAT COMMISSION

CLERGY ASSEMBLY HOLY HOUR FERVORINO MARCH 2022

“Then Jesus approached them and said, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go therefore, and make disciples from all nations. Baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to fulfil all that I have commanded you. I am with you until the end of the world.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

We all know well these words of the great commission from the Gospel of Matthew. It is Jesus’ commission to his *whole* Church, but we in the ordained ministry as bishops, priests, and deacons, feel these words more keenly and sense in them a particular impetus as indeed we should.

We are sent by the authority and with the authority of Jesus Christ to baptise, to teach, and to make disciples. This is indeed a great commission in which I know I am extremely privileged to share; at times it brings me great rejoicing as I see it bear fruit; but at times I must confess I sense it as a very *weighty* commission.

For I know that The Lord Jesus himself has chosen me, equipped me, given me a share in his authority, so that I can indeed make disciples for him. But when I look at myself in all honesty and look at the modern world into which he sends me, I wonder “how?”. How can I possibly bear the fruit that my Lord expects of me? At times the awesomeness of this commission makes me tremble.

I wouldn’t be surprised if you at times had similar feelings. This commission we receive is indeed a weighty gift, for without exaggerating our own importance as individuals we know that as priests and deacons, we are significant players in the state of the Church, the state of the world, and the salvation of souls. We are not just players in some inconsequential game like monopoly; we are players in the great drama of human life and salvation history.

Yes, it is a weighty commission. I imagine the Apostles too felt its the weight. So, it’s not surprising that upon giving them the commission - upon sending them out to the whole world - Jesus first tells them to wait. He sends them back into Jerusalem where they shut themselves in a room with the Mother of God and pray for nine days – the first Novena. On the tenth day they knew they were ready. They did not commence the mission until they had spent time together in prayer and until they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Like the Apostles, each of us has spent time in prayer and formation and been filled with the Holy Spirit - in our baptism, confirmation, and ordination - so we *are* ready to undertake this mission.

But as human beings it’s not enough for us to do things just once. This cycle of coming in for prayer and formation, then going out in mission and evangelization needs to be our pattern in life on a yearly cycle with our retreat and assemblies, a weekly cycle with our observance of the Lord’s Day, and a daily cycle with prayer and reading. The daily cycle is perhaps most important because if we don’t do it properly daily, we won’t do it properly weekly or yearly. We hear it so often and we know it’s true. First comes prayer, then comes action. Jesus formed the Twelve first to be with him and then to be sent out. (Mark 3:14)

You may have noticed that in his address to the recent International Theological Symposium on the Priesthood (17 February 2022), Pope Francis spoke about the four pillars of the priest’s life: Being

close to God; close to your bishop; close to your brother priests; and close to the holy people of God. Being close to God, he says, comes first. He begins with John 15:5-7: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" and then goes on to say (and here I repeat a few quotes):

"A priest is called above all to cultivate this closeness, this intimacy with God, and from this relationship, he will be able to draw all the strength needed for his ministry ... Without a meaningful relationship with the Lord, our ministry will prove fruitless."

"Like the Master. You will experience joy, wedding feasts, miracles and healings, multiplications of loaves, moments of praise. But you will also experience ingratitude, rejection, doubt and solitude to the point of crying out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Closeness to Jesus makes us unafraid of those times."

"Many crises in the priesthood originate precisely in a poor life of prayer, a lack of intimacy with the Lord, the reduction of the spiritual life to mere religious practice ... The intimacy born of prayer, the spiritual life, concrete closeness to God through listening to his word, the celebration of the Eucharist, the silence of adoration, entrustment to Mary, the wise accompaniment of a guide and the sacrament of Reconciliation. Without these concrete forms of closeness, a priest is merely a weary hireling."

"None of this is easy, however, unless we are accustomed to find moments of silence throughout our day and to set aside (that) activism ... (which) very often can be an escape – because once we stop running around, what we immediately feel is not peace but a kind of emptiness ... Work is a distraction, in order not to enter the desolation. Yet desolation is a little point of encounter with God."

And lastly, "Being tired from work is normal, going to rest and watching (a little) television are legitimate, but without the Lord, without this closeness? ... Feeling no need to say to the Lord "Goodbye, until tomorrow, many thanks!" These are little acts that reveal the attitude of a priestly soul."

I conclude with a little image for closeness to God from Saint Teresa I came across many years ago and which I sometimes call to mind when at prayer with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. She said: "Let us be careful never to be at a distance from Jesus our beloved shepherd, nor to lose sight of him: for the sheep which are near their shepherd are always more caressed and better fed, and always receive some choice morsels of that which he himself eats. If by chance the shepherd sleeps, still the lamb remains near him, and either waits until his slumber ends, or itself awakens him; and it is then caressed with favours anew." (St Alphonsus Liguori, Visits to the Blessed Sacrament, 11th visit)

Being amongst the weakest of men and having the greatest of tasks we need encouragement. Encouragement from your bishop; encouragement from each other; encouragement from your people; and most of all encouragement from God who has chosen you and who sends you. Stay close to the God of closeness every day and you *will* receive this divine encouragement.

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