

Homily at the Shrine of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Cuba



The Gospel we have just heard tells us about something the Lord does every time he visits us: he calls us out of our house. These are images which we are asked to contemplate over and over again. God's presence in our lives never leaves us tranquil: it always pushes to do something. When God comes, he always calls us out of our house. We are visited so that we can visit others; we are encountered so as to encounter others; we receive love in order to give love.

In the Gospel we see Mary, the first disciple. A young woman of perhaps between fifteen and seventeen years of age who, in a small village of Palestine, was visited by the Lord, who told her that she was to be the mother of the Savior. Mary was far from "thinking it was all about her", or thinking that everyone had to come and wait upon her; she left her house and went out to serve. First she goes to help her cousin Elizabeth. The joy which blossoms when we know that God is with us, with our people, gets our heart beating, gets our legs moving and "draws us out of ourselves". It leads us to take the joy we have received and to share it in service, in those "pregnant" situations which our neighbors or families may be experiencing. The Gospel tells us that Mary went in haste, slowly but surely, with a steady pace, neither too fast nor so slow as never to get there. Neither anxious nor distracted, Mary goes with haste to accompany her cousin who conceived in her old age. Henceforth this was always to be her way. She has always been the woman who visits men and women, children, the elderly and the young. She has visited and accompanied many of our peoples in the drama of their birth; she has watched over the struggles of those who fought to defend the rights of their children. And now, she continues to bring us the Word of Life, her Son, our Lord.

These lands have also been visited by her maternal presence. The Cuban homeland was born and grew, warmed by devotion to Our Lady of Charity. As the bishops of this country have written: "In a special and unique way she has molded the Cuban soul, inspiring the highest ideals of love of God, the family and the nation in the heart of the Cuban people".

This was what your fellow citizens also stated a hundred years ago, when they asked Pope Benedict XV to declare Our Lady of Charity the Patroness of Cuba. They wrote that "neither disgrace nor poverty were ever able to crush the faith and the love which our Catholic people profess for the Virgin of Charity, for whom, in all their trials, when death was imminent or desperation was at the door, there arose, like a light scattering the darkness of every peril, like a comforting dew..., the vision of that Blessed Virgin, utterly Cuban and loved as such by our cherished mothers, blessed as such by our wives."

In this shrine, which keeps alive the memory of God's holy and faithful pilgrim people in Cuba, Mary is venerated as the Mother of Charity. From here she protects our roots, our identity, so that we may never stray to paths of despair. The soul of the Cuban people, as we have just heard, was forged amid suffering and privation which could not suppress the faith, that faith which was kept alive thanks to all those grandmothers who fostered, in the daily life of their homes, the living presence of God, the presence of the Father who liberates, strengthens, heals, grants courage and serves as a sure refuge and the sign of a new resurrection. Grandmothers, mothers, and so many others who with tenderness and love were signs of visitation, valor and faith for their grandchildren, in their families. They kept open a tiny space, small as a mustard seed, through which the Holy Spirit continued to accompany the heartbeat of this people.

“Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness” (Evangeliu Gaudium, 288).

Generation after generation, day after day, we are asked to renew our faith. We are asked to live the revolution of tenderness as Mary, our Mother of Charity, did. We are invited to “leave home” and to open our eyes and hearts to others. Our revolution comes about through tenderness, through the joy which always becomes closeness and compassion, and leads us to get involved in, and to serve, the life of others. Our faith makes us leave our homes and go forth to encounter others, to share their joys, their hopes and their frustrations. Our faith, “calls us out of our house”, to visit the sick, the prisoner and to those who mourn. It makes us able to laugh with those who laugh, and rejoice with our neighbors who rejoice.

Like Mary, we want to be a Church which serves, which leaves home and goes forth, which goes forth from its chapels, its sacristies, in order to accompany life, to sustain hope, to be a sign of unity. Like Mary, Mother of Charity, we want to be a Church which goes forth to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation. Like Mary, we want to be a Church which can accompany all those “pregnant” situations of our people, committed to life, to culture, to society, not washing our hands but rather walking with our brothers and sisters.

This is our most valuable treasure (cobre), this is our greatest wealth and the best legacy we can give: to learn like Mary to leave home and set out on the path of visitation. And to learn to pray with Mary, for her prayer is one of remembrance and gratitude; it is the canticle of the People of God on their pilgrimage through history. It is the living reminder that God passes through our midst; the perennial memory that God has looked upon the lowliness of his people, he has come the aid of his servant, even as promised to our forebears and their children forever.

Pope Francis in Cuba