

Humanae Vitae Mass
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

August 17, 2013
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

One of the great travel destinations for Catholic pilgrims in Italy is the quaint hill town of Assisi, best known for its most famous resident, St. Francis. When I was doing my graduate studies in Rome, Assisi was a favorite place of mine to go for a quiet retreat. Many travelers use various words to describe this town, but one of the most popular is that it is 'peaceful.' In fact, as you walk out of the Upper Church of the Basilica of St. Francis, you are greeted by a sprawling lawn with a set of shrubs in the shape of the word '*pax*.' *Pax* is the Latin word for peace, and this has been used in conjunction with the life and teaching of St. Francis and the Franciscan tradition in general. Peace is also a word that is used extensively throughout the Scriptures, both in the Old and New Testaments. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the long-expected Messiah as the "prince of peace." (Is 9:6) After His Resurrection, the first thing Jesus says

to His Apostles is: "Peace be with you." (Jn 20:19) Peace, then, is a key concept to the message of the Gospel and the living out of our faith.

The Gospel that we hear today brings up this topic of peace, though in a way that may seem confusing to us. Jesus says the following words to His disciples: "Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division" (Jn 12:51). This is one of those difficult passages of the Gospel for us to reconcile. It seems to go contrary to what we think about Christianity. Pope-Emeritus Benedict commented on this passage and helps us to understand what Christ is saying to us. He said that: "Christ's words mean that the peace he came to bring us is not synonymous with the mere absence of conflicts."¹ He was preparing His disciples for the fact that as they were to bring the Gospel message to the world, it would be met with great resistance, even to the point of dividing families. The reason for this division, the Holy Father says, is due to the constant struggle that exists between good and evil. The message of the Gospel, which is of course good, encounters the message of the world, which is often very much opposed to that of our faith.

This experience is not confined just to the New Testament, though. We see this dynamic played out time and again with the prophets of the

Old Testament whose message was often met with disagreement and even violence. Such is the example we hear from our first reading from the prophet Jeremiah. The princes of King Zedekiah complain that Jeremiah is demoralizing the people, telling them things they do not want to hear, things which, according to the princes, show that he is not interested in the welfare of the people. (cf. Jer. 38:4) Therefore, he needs to be removed from the picture. Doing so would allow the people to go back to their so-called peaceful way of living without having to worry about being troubled by the difficult message of this prophet. Here we see the conflict that exists with regard to peace. The true message of peace which God offers is met with resistance because it demands repentance and conversion on the part of the people. Such a demand is not welcomed, at least according to the world, as a path to peace because it is challenging and the world so often would prefer the path of least resistance.

We can point to many events in the history of the Church that witness to this conflict between the message of the Gospel and the message of the world. We can consider many times in which the Holy Father, speaking on behalf of the Church, has proclaimed the message boldly, only

to be met with a similar reaction to that of the prophet Jeremiah that we heard about in the first reading.

One such example of this took place 45 years ago shortly after the Second Vatican Council when Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical on the transmission of human life, *Humanae Vitae*. In this encyclical, the Holy Father provides a magnificent description of the “most serious role in which married people collaborate freely and responsibly with God the Creator.”² But he also declared that methods of artificial birth control, along with direct abortion and sterilization, “are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children.”³

Because of this latter declaration, this document was met with fierce resistance not only from the secular world, but also from lay members of the Church as well as clergy. Several people even encouraged Paul VI to resign in a similar way that the people wanted Jeremiah out of the picture so that people could go back to their ‘peaceful’ way of life and not have to worry about having their consciences troubled by such a challenging message.

After 45 years, this is an issue that is still a source of great division in our society and even in the Church. One cannot neglect to notice how

prophetic the Holy Father was when he predicted the impacts on society that the rejection of this teaching would produce, including the lowering of moral standards and the loss of reverence due to women in particular.⁴ The Church continues to remain firm in defending her position, which is met by many with the attitude that the Church is not concerned about the welfare of the people and the very real challenges that they face in our modern world. In reality, though, we know this could not be further from the truth, for the Church's position seeks to safeguard the true dignity of all of her children, especially in the face of the many challenges from the culture which diminish that dignity in so many ways. In addition, the Church and her leaders are very much aware that their first concern is for the salvation of her people, the ultimate display of concern for welfare, for it reaches into eternity.

This is not to say, however, that the Church is not concerned for the quality of our lives during this earthly pilgrimage. She is *indeed* concerned but wants us to see that true peace and happiness in this world are to be found by way of the path of truth presented by the Gospel. Jesus says in John's Gospel that "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (Jn 8:32) Christ has given the Church the authority to continue to

proclaim the truth and apply it to the modern circumstances in which we live so that all can continue to experience that freedom as we await His return in glory. By humbly submitting ourselves to that truth kept safe for us by the Church, we come to know, already here and now, the freedom God has destined for His children, a freedom which will find its fulfillment in Heaven. Countless couples can speak to the freedom that they have come to experience in their marriages by placing their trust in this truth, swimming against the tide of popular opinion, but doing so with faith and hope that the Church provides this guidance as a loving mother, truly concerned for the ultimate well-being of her children.

In contrast to these committed Catholic couples, far too many Catholics have justified their rejection of this papal teaching, and subsequently, all Catholic teaching on human sexuality, marriage and family life, as a matter of following their “conscience,” but apparently without properly understanding what “conscience” means. The word “conscience” comes from two Latin words, “co-” (which means “together” or “with”) and “science” (which means to have knowledge about something). Conscience means to share knowledge with someone else about what is right or wrong. Conscience does not act in isolation on some

sort of personal or individual intuition disconnected from someone or something else. For a Catholic, a properly formed conscience means to share God's knowledge and the Church's teaching about right or wrong. So those who invoke "conscience" to justify their rejection of divine law as taught by the Catholic Church are saying that they have chosen to follow the thinking, knowledge and values of someone or something other than the Pope or the Catholic Church.

Committing oneself to walk the Gospel path of truth, whatever area it may involve, will always include challenges. But God never deprives us of the grace that is necessary in order to overcome those challenges. It is therefore important for us, as we make that journey, to always place our trust in Him, and not in ourselves. By our regular reception of the sacraments and through daily prayer, we open ourselves to let this grace grow within us. Let us ask God as we receive the Eucharist today for renewed strength so that we might "persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith " (Heb 12:2) as He continues to lead us through His Church on the path of truth that leads to true peace in the Kingdom of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Angelus Address*, 19 August 2007.

² Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 1.

³ Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 14.

⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 17.