

**Homily for the Mass for 15th Anniversary of
Sacred Heart Shrine of the Jesuit Millennium Center
Chicago, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

When I went to the Holy Land in the year 2005, the very first place that I visited was the Mount of the Beatitudes, where I celebrated Mass outdoors with the priests that accompanied me on the very spot where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, which we just heard in today's Gospel passage from Saint Matthew.

It is said that going to the Holy Land gives the visitor a better appreciation for the Bible. That was certainly true in my case. I had read the Sermon on the Mount many times before, but I had always envisioned a mountain or a hill from which Jesus spoke, as implied by the title, "Sermon on the Mount." When I actually saw that place in person with my own eyes, I immediately appreciated the beauty of that location that Jesus must have personally seen looking out at the glistening waters of the Sea of Galilee. Suddenly the grandeur of Jesus' sermon became apparent.

Each one of the eight beatitudes starts with a Greek word, *makarios*, which can be translated as “blessed,” “happy,” or “fortunate.” It describes a very positive situation producing joy and well-being in a person’s life. In a religious context, this usually indicates a positive relationship with God.

Today we celebrate a very positive situation that has produced joy and well-being in many people’s lives as we mark the fifteenth anniversary of this Shrine dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Jesuit Millennium Center. It is indeed an experience of *makarios*, for the people who come here seeking a positive relationship with God are truly blessed, happy and fortunate. We are very grateful to the priests of the Society of Jesus for their dedicated ministry here and to the benefactors whose generosity has made possible this Shrine of the Sacred Heart at the Jesuit Millennium Center. This is indeed a place where the Good News is proclaimed.

In the Gospels, there is much mention of “the Good News,” because that is what the word “Gospel” means. Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God is at hand, and that people should repent and believe the Good News, but Jesus does not come right out and say what the Good News actually is. Jesus challenges Simon and Andrew, James and John, to stop what they are

doing and follow him. They are not told where they are going. There is a growing sense of excitement, but no details about the Good News. The Gospel then gives a summary of Jesus' activity. He preaches in synagogues, he heals sick people; this does begin to sound like Good News for those involved, but we suspect there must be more to come – and this is the point we reach in today's Gospel.

Now we begin to understand the scope of the Good News. It is outlined in full in the Sermon on the Mount, which Jesus now preaches: his first of five public sermons spread throughout the Gospel of Saint Matthew. Today's passage consists of the famous introduction, which we know as the Beatitudes. These sayings constitute one of the most familiar of all Gospel passages. It is used in the liturgy of the Church more than any other Gospel text, covering a surprising range from ordinary Sundays and weekdays to major seasons, from funerals to weddings, and on a variety of commemorations, sacramental ceremonies and saints' days. It is the first passage in the Gospel of Matthew to give a clear indication of what Jesus means by the Good News.

The scene is set in a very formal way. The one who proclaims the Good News assumes the role of an authoritative teacher. In New

Testament times, teachers simply sat down in an open space and began to teach. Their ability as teachers was reflected in the size of the audience that gathered round to listen to them. Matthew says that Jesus saw a large crowd (presumably waiting for him), and he sat down and taught them. In the Beatitudes, he makes plain what the Good News consists of: it is the possession of the kingdom of heaven. This is stressed at both the beginning and the end of the list: the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are poor in spirit, and to those who are persecuted in the cause of right.

Jesus may well have been the first person ever to declare clearly to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs; he is certainly the first and only person who spelled out the qualification for membership. Not only does the kingdom belong to those who are poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for standing up for what is right: it is found among those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for what is right, who are merciful, pure in heart... and so on.

The Good News is that the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus turned words into action when he cured sick people, cleansed lepers, forgave sinners, that is, when he made the words of the Beatitudes a concrete reality for those whose lives were broken. It is Good News that the values

of God are here for people to share. In Jesus' final sermon in Matthew, in the last judgement parable, he tells his followers that whatever they do for the least of His brothers and sisters is the way they behave toward Christ Himself. Jesus' Good News was expressed in His actions as well as His words. Following our Lord's example, we are called to share the Good News by bringing the values of the kingdom of God to others as we live out the teaching of Jesus.

May God give us this grace. Amen.