

Homily for the Feast of the Holy Family

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here gathered in prayer on this last day of the Year of Our Lord 2017 to celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. The last day of the calendar year is a good time to take stock of the preceding twelve months, to ask forgiveness for those times when we fell short of what God our Father expects of us as His sons and daughters, and to give thanks for the bountiful gifts that we have received from our Creator. It is also a time to look ahead with firm resolve to make improvements in our lives with the help of God's grace.

As we look to the past year in review, let me take you back a bit farther in time to May of 1953, when a textbook salesman knocked on the door of the up-and-coming author, Flannery O'Connor. She welcomed him into her home, and their conversation drifted from pleasantries like the weather, to her farm, his book sales, and even to Catholicism. Upon discovering Flannery's almost fierce devotion to her Catholic faith, the

salesman admitted he wasn't much of a believer, but that he *had* brushed up against the faith twice during his time in New York City: he had studied philosophy and taught German at Fordham University, a Jesuit school, and he had met Dorothy Day. He had become fascinated by Day's Catholic Worker House, which was about an hour south of the University.

Flannery would later explain to a friend that her salesman guest said he could not see, in his words, why Dorothy Day "fed endless lines of endless bums for whom there was no hope. She'd never see any results from that." After spending some time discussing the point, O'Connor admits that the only conclusion they could agree to "was that Charity was not understandable ..." — ending her story with the almost question, "Strange people turn up, don't they."¹

That was probably what Joseph and Mary were thinking when the two people mentioned in today's Gospel — a just and pious man named Simeon and the prophetess Anna — abruptly and unexpectedly inserted themselves among the holy family, praising God and speaking of the child Jesus whom they had only just laid eyes on. But unlike the traveling salesman, Simeon and Anna understood hope!

The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. The moment he sees the child Jesus, Simeon recognizes that he has met the salvation of the world, and so he utters the prayer known in Latin as the *Nunc dimittis*: “Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.”² This extends the Holy Family in two ways: it now includes not only Israel, but the whole world as well. Jesus has come for the salvation of all peoples. Ultimately it will be the world that is the family of Jesus, and that now includes us.

Further witness to the identity of Jesus is given by the prophetess, Anna. An elderly woman widowed for many years, Anna spent day and night in the Temple court, praying, fasting, worshiping, and waiting, which is another way of saying she spent night and day immersed in hope and in memory, the temple representing the whole of Israel’s hope that God would again rescue them from their current untenable situation, and the remembering, the recalling of how He done so in the past. She confirms the testimony of Simeon.

On seeing the child, Anna somehow knows her many years of vigil are over; that in this child, hope and memory are wed in such a way as to be fulfilled. God had once again kept His promise of salvation and sent the Messiah to deliver them from their captivity – not just this time, but for all time.

And here He is.

Anna had much time to meditate on the biblical and salvific events of the past. She has, in fact, made Israel's memory her own; she has made the story of the scriptures the story of her own life. Accordingly, she, like any prophet, cannot help but to tell others that their hope is not in vain, that God has kept His promises to them and how He has done so.

The scriptures make this point explicitly, that after coming upon Christ, she then "spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem."³

But Anna is not the only one to speak up in response to encountering Jesus. In Luke's Gospel, everyone seems to speak of it. Luke employs the Greek word, *laleo*, meaning, "to speak," thirty-one times in his Gospel and twice that number in *The Acts of Apostles*, the sequel to his Gospel.⁴ In almost every case, it is more like preaching and less like speaking. It is a

response to the Lord and what He is all about. When one experiences hope fulfilled, it seems one cannot help but tell of it. Consider a few of the examples Luke gives:

The Angel Gabriel speaks good news to Zechariah in the Temple, Elizabeth speaks of joy at hearing of Mary's faith, the shepherds speak of encountering the angelic host, demons speak of Jesus being the Son of God as He casts them out, the son of the widow of Nain speaks after Jesus raises him from the dead, the disciples speak after walking with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and Jesus speaks his peace to his disciples after the Resurrection.

God's fidelity manifested before the eyes of the faithful elicits a response from them: they speak; they speak of faith to those in search of it. Anna witnesses to this pattern of evangelization, of hearing the Good News and responding to it by proclaiming it boldly and enthusiastically.

Now, we too are called to continue this pattern of hearing the Good News and sharing it confidently and joyfully with others. During this past year, our diocese held our Fourth Diocesan Synod, which concluded last month. It was historic in that our previous Diocesan Synod was held in 1963. In addition to the clergy and consecrated religious who participated,

one delegate from each of our 129 parishes in this Diocese voted overwhelmingly to adopt a dozen declarations intended to set the direction and tone for the pastoral ministry of this local Church for at least the next ten years.

The first of these declarations proclaims a new mission statement for all of us as members of this Diocese: “The mission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is to build a fervent community of intentional and dedicated missionary disciples of the Risen Lord and steadfast stewards of God’s creation who seek to become saints. Accordingly, the community of Catholic faithful in this diocese is committed to the discipleship and stewardship way of life as commanded by Christ Our Savior and as revealed by Sacred Scripture and Tradition.” To further this mission, the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is committed to implementing the Four Pillars of Discipleship and Stewardship, namely, **hospitality, prayer, formation** and **service**. In other words, we will **invite** people proactively to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass; we will **provide** well-prepared celebrations of the sacraments and other occasions for **prayer** as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven; we will **study** the Bible and **learn** more about Jesus and

our Catholic faith; and we will **serve** each other, especially those in need, by practicing charity and justice. You might say that these are our diocesan new year's resolutions!

As you contemplate your personal new year's resolutions, I invite you to consider how you can advance on your own individual path of holiness by growing in faith, hope and especially charity as a missionary disciple of Jesus Christ.

Flannery was right: strange people do turn up at our door. Sometimes they insert themselves in our lives to remind us that Christ has come and there is reason to hope in God's fulfilled promises. Sometimes they show up at the door to brush up against our inscrutable charity.

Ultimately, we cannot explain charity, or its results, or lack thereof.

That is God's business.

There will always be endless lines of endless bums.

But there will also always be those who hear, as so many do in Luke's Gospel, who hear God's call to faith, hope, and charity.

There will always be those prophets who persevere in the place of hope and memory and share their graced encounters with Christ with those still in search of the Him.

May we be among that number.

May we be among the number who repeat, who tell others of the Good News which God has spoken to us; may we clothe that message of His fidelity in the garments of charity, and so fascinate the world into conversion.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Flannery O'Connor, Letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald dated May 7, 1953, collected in *The Habit of Being*, page 58.

² Lk. 2:29-32.

³ Lk. 2:38

⁴ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/laleo.html>