

PRO CHRISTO LEGATIONE ERGO FUNGIMUR

A Sermon for the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul.

St Eric's Catholic Cathedral, Stockholm, Sweden.

Texts: Acts 9: 1-22; Ps. 117; Mark 16:15-18.

“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ.” My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is with joy that I address you on this great day. This day is great because it is the day set aside by the Church of Christ to mark the conversion of Saul of Tarsus who became Paul the Apostle. For all of us gathered here it is a day of great joy because we join the Universal Church to celebrate the 2000th birthday of the man whose faith and missionary zeal changed the whole world for Christ. It is the celebration of that Apostle of Christ whose letters, although written to peoples who lived at a different time and in cultures different from our own, have continued to inspire countless peoples to give their lives to Christ.

“We are ambassadors for Christ.” Whereas it is a day of joy for every Catholic Christian, it is especially so for the Missionaries of St Paul. This is because this great man of God is our patron. He stands before us to inspire us, to encourage us, to challenge us and to pray for us in a special way. Right from the time we all passed through the nine foundational years in the seminary, the spirit of St Paul has been formed in us, and daily and progressively this initial formation transforms us to make us copies of St Paul for the world of the 21st century. The intention of our founder, Cardinal Dominic Ignatius Ekandem and the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria with him, was to form a group of holy and zealous priests who are willing and ready to give their all for Christ. The Missionaries of St Paul are a gift from the Catholic Church in Nigeria to the Universal Church, indeed to the entire world. The Letters of St Paul are written in their hearts and can easily be read by all who meet them. By their lives of witness, people can easily read that for them, “To live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Even without saying it people know that they are filled with the Holy Spirit and that their zeal for the Gospel is like saying, “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16) – that they heed the words of St Paul to Timothy, “Proclaim the message and, welcome or unwelcome insist on it. Refute falsehood, correct error, give encouragement – but do all with patience and with care to instruct” (1 Tim. 4: 2). Since we came to Sweden in 2000, we have consistently tried to uphold this identity and to constantly be renewed in the Holy Spirit. Every day, every hour, every moment we have spent in Sweden we have striven to be faithful to our call, our identity and our mission. We have faced a lot of challenges. But in every one of them, the Lord Jesus Christ has faithfully stood by our side. We are aware that since “God is for us no one can be against us” (Rom. 8: 31), which is why we are certain that nothing can cut us off from the love of Christ or discourage us – not the cold and dark winter weather nor the lack of faith among so many people. We have a deep understanding of the urgency needed to proclaim this most important message- the message of truth and salvation. So we are not deterred by the darkness that comes even in the afternoon in winter or by the snow storm. And

while some people in this country are tempted to put the teaching of Christ on very serious issues of marriage and life aside and are distracted with debates seeking to be popular or politically correct, “we preach Christ, who is the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1: 24), fully aware that God has called us not to be popular but to be faithful witnesses.

“We are ambassadors for Christ.” The conversion experience of St Paul was one that shaped his life and message. He willingly called himself a persecutor of Christ and his followers and even a blasphemer. He attributed everything he was and did to the grace that he received. Here is what he tells all us to day, “Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners. I myself am the greatest of them and if mercy has been shown me, it is because Jesus Christ meant to make me the leading example of his inexhaustible patience for all the other people who were later to trust in him for eternal life” (1 Tim. 1: 15 - 16). What this means for all of us who are listening is that today is a day of decision. God has called us all to a life of holiness. And as Pope John Paul II tells us, “Holiness is not a privilege of the few. It is a gift offered to all.” Like Saul of Tarsus, many people in our world - this country included - believe that they are right. They pursue their relativist ideology with enthusiasm. These people have a wrong notion of freedom - a freedom without responsibility. But I say this to you today: “let the Holy Spirit direct your lives and you will no longer yield to self indulgence” (Gal. 5: 16). The Holy Spirit makes a difference in the life of an individual. His presence is the mark of the followers of Christ. And his gifts manifest in various ways in those who have received him, as we have read in the Gospel of today.

“We are ambassadors for Christ.” We need your prayers and your material support. An inspired person said, “Some give to mission by going and some go to mission by giving. There is no mission possible without both.” We have our members who serve in really difficult circumstances. The people they are sent to serve are materially poor. They need all the material help they can get. And for us and all the members of the MSP, pray that we keep the faith and fight the good fight against the power of evil to the very end and “avoid any risk that having acted as herald for others, we ourselves may be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27).

On behalf of my brothers here present, and all the Missionaries of St Paul, I say a big thank you to the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI and to His Grace Emil Paul Tserrig, to Bishop Anders Arborelius, to all the priests in the Diocese of Stockholm, to the DMMM Sisters and all the religious men and women, to Deacon Pancho Chi A Loi and Bengt Malmgren, to all the members of the African Catholic Community, to the Nigerian ambassador to the Scandinavia, to all our beloved parishioners, and to everyone present at this Holy Mass. “I thank my God whenever I think of you and when I pray for you, I always pray with joy.” (Phil. 1: 3-4).

Fr. Damian O. Eze, MSP

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