

Homily of Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, Archbishop of Paris

*"An original vision of man, family life, social commitment,
and the relationships to work, money and Gods creation"*

DUBLIN - 12 JUNE 2012

Readings: 1 Kings 17:7-16 (the widow of Sarepta);

Psalms 4:2-5.7-9 (Hear me when I call...);

Matthew 5:13-16 (Salt of the earth and light of the world).

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

What is the light that we Christians are asked to let shine among humans? It is Christ's light. Our baptism has made us the witnesses of that light before whole humankind. The readings we have just heard help us discover the mission that Jesus gave to his disciples when he told them that they were "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." They are sent to enlighten humans, and also to stimulate them, to be the ferment of the improvement of humankind. This passage, which comes just after the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel, teaches us what it means to be Christians in this world. We are shown the way to be followed by Christ's disciples, by all those who go along with him thanks to their baptism and make up his Church.

If the salt loses its saltiness ...

Jesus first warns us against the risk of losing what makes us different. We know that salt makes food tasty, but that if it loses this singular quality, it becomes useless. In the same way, Christians are not in this world to submerge it or to take possession of it, and rather to bring it something special that transforms it. This means that the world, however large it may be, is not self-sufficient. If it locks itself out, it remains unable to make humans happy. It needs something from outside. In other words, just as salt boosts the quality of food, Christians are called to enhance the taste and the richness of the realities of this world. On the other hand, if the Christians immersed in the life of this world lose their specificity, then they become useless. If we forget the One who sends us into this world and what our vocation involves, if we allow ourselves to be absorbed into this world without displaying anything distinctive, if we simply live like everybody else, then our very existence is vain and that of the world has no flavour.

We often hear complaints that our society fails to respect Christianity. Some are shocked to see that Christians are laughed at, or even sometimes ostracized, or that the signs of a Christian presence are suppressed or challenged. But if we are "thrown out", as the Gospel puts it (Matthew 5:13), is it only because the others don't like us? Is it not also because they cannot figure out what use we could be? Why welcome Christ's disciples if they prove unable to add anything to life as it is in this world?

Yet, how could we bear witness to the novelty and hope of Christ if we neglected to go back to the source of our communion? The Paschal Mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ, as it is celebrated in the Eucharist, and particularly in the Sunday Mass, is not a detail in Christian life. Without this celebration, Christian life unavoidably becomes flavourless. In the simplicity and even sometimes the poverty of every Mass, Christ himself gathers and feeds his people, strengthens it and deeply ingrains it with its “genetic code[1].” Within and through the Eucharist, we actually are this “messianic community of disciples who live on the surge of God’s Kingdom in Jesus himself[2].” The Christian people is not scattered all about by the unpredictable winds of history. It is sent to the whole world from the heart of the Sunday Eucharist so that everyone, according to his or her personality, talents, social condition and limits, may be a living image of Christ.

We know that the testimony of Catholic families is especially decisive to add the salt of the Gospel at the core of today’s world. To be the salt of the earth cannot mean accepting that all behaviours are equally good, or that the various combinations existing nowadays all make up genuine families. Rather, it seems to me that the wealth and grace of the sacrament of marriage provide Christians with the words and the means to bear witness to the greatness of the family as the stable union of a man and a woman in order to bring up their children before those who believe as well as before those who don’t. Giving this testimony is what allows not to consider the Christian family like a threatened species in need of wary protection, requiring even the creation of special reservations. We are not the last isolated defenders of one form of family life that all the others would have forsaken; but in Christ we are the trustees of the truths that all men and women are called to share and benefit from.

You are the light of the world

The image of the light in the Gospel offers another insight on the presence of Christians in this world. “You are the light of the world. [...] You don’t light a lamp to put it under a bowl. Instead you put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14a.15-16). The reality of our good deeds turns our lives into light.

If the light of the Gospel enlightens the world, this is not because we are supposed to control more efficient pyrotechnical technologies, or to have a better command of media communications. The light radiates from “good deeds” of Christ’s disciples. If we do not do the good that the Scriptures call us to do, Christ’s light will remain invisible, however loudly we speak on the public square, on the radio or on television. Our mission is not to vie with other messages competing for the public’s attention. It is to bear witness to God’s love in the world. We know that “the excellency of speech or of wisdom” (1 Corinthians 2:1) or the strength of our beliefs is not enough to make our “good deeds” shine. If they do shine, it is because the power of God’s Spirit manifests itself through them. Then, if God’s love is at

work in our lives, however modestly and discreetly, the life of the Spirit will reveal itself and we will be listened to!

In the field of family life, we must not rule out anything of all that can be done publicly to defend the value of the family. But the first mission of Christian families is to live concretely by these values, by “reconciliation, mutual acceptance and joy in giving one’s life for one’s loved ones[3].” The strength of our testimonies lies in the examples we give. The Church will be heard and respected inasmuch as she helps Christians remain irreversibly faithful, confident enough to welcome new lives, tirelessly kind to the oldest and to the most vulnerable, and respectfully open to the ones who are alone.

In the abstract we have just heard from the Book of Kings, the widow of Sarepta begins by giving the prophet Elijah all that stands between her and her son and inescapable death. There is no reservation in her gift. We could say it is irrational. And yet it eventually means life for the three of them. As our text says, “And the barrel of meal was not exhausted, neither was the jug of oil” (1 Kings 17:16). The Eucharist provides a strength of life, love and unity which is permanently offered and available. And yet we know that it bears fruit proportionally to our personal commitment to follow Christ as he offers himself. What we may share of the little we have and the little we are is what strengthens our spiritual communion. To take part in the Eucharist is concretely to give our lives for our brothers and sisters. Only this unconditional way of participating in the Eucharist will allow us to associate to our celebrations the ones who, for various reasons, cannot immediately receive the Eucharistic communion.

Being “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” means proffering an original vision of man, family life, social commitment, and the relationships to work, money and God’s creation. It amounts to bringing the whole universe into communion with Christ. It must be kept in mind that this vision and this communion are no mere theoretical projects. They are rooted in the dedication of our lives to the service of our brothers and sisters, in giving ourselves to them. Our legitimacy as Christians in the middle of the world is not based on our know-how or on our wisdom, but on the power of the Holy Spirit who enables us to offer our lives for the others because we love them.

This is the way, in the dynamism reignited by the Second Vatican Council, through which our Church will reveal “Jesus Christ so that the men and women of our time may see him, hear him and discover him alive among us[4].”

Amen.