

**Homily at Liturgy of Reconciliation given by Cardinal Peter Turkson,
President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace**

*"We are to celebrate joy so that the liturgy mirrors
the abundance of good things provided by God"*

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Dear Brothers and Sisters, as pilgrims we all share Christ's call to conversion, reconciliation, communion, holiness and discipleship. This morning we have watched and sung and prayed together. The readings are still ringing in our ears: "Whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me" said Jesus; "A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me," cried the Psalmist; "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost," said Jesus, and "Whoever drinks of the water that I will give, it will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." And then He said, "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." [1]

I invite you to keep your ears and hearts open as you listen to a story, something that happened in our times, and to ask yourself: could this be my story too?

My name is Sister Geneviève and I belong to the community of St. Mary of Namur in Rwanda. I am a survivor of the Tutsi genocide in 1994. Many of my family were killed while in our parish church. The sight of this building used to turn my stomach and fill me with horror, just like encountering any of the perpetrators filled me with disgust and rage.

It is in this mental state that something happened in 1997 that would change my whole life and my relationships.

A Catholic group called "The Ladies of Divine Mercy" brought me to two prisons in the region of Kibuye, my birthplace. They were preparing the prisoners for the Great Jubilee of 2000. Their message to prisoners and survivors was:

If you have killed, commit yourself to ask for forgiveness from the survivor; in this way, you can help the victim to free himself from the burden of vengeance, hatred and rancour.

If you are a victim, commit yourself to offer forgiveness to those who harmed your family; in this way, you can free the perpetrator from the weight of his crime and the evil that is in him. This message had an immediate effect upon one of the prisoners ... and then upon me.

A prisoner stood up in tears, came to me, fell to his knees before me and loudly begged: "Mercy! Mercy!" I was horrified, petrified, to recognize a family friend who had grown up with us and shared everything with us.

He admitted to having killed my father. He told me details of the deaths of my family members. A feeling of pity and compassion invaded me. I lifted him to his feet, embraced him in tears and said to him: "You are my brother and always will be."

Then I felt a huge weight lift off of me and, in its place, *flowing inner peace*. I thanked the man I was embracing. To my great surprise, he cried out: "Justice can do its work and condemn me to death, for now I am free!" [2]

Could this be my story, your story, too?

Now St. Paul, if he had heard Sister Geneviève's testimony, would exhort us with all his heart: "Rejoice, Be perfect, Admonish or encourage one another, Have the same mind and attitude, Live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you." [3] I would like now to explore with you what these five exhortations mean for us today.

1. The first thing I suggest, with the same pastoral tenderness as Paul, is that we **Rejoice!** Wake up that joy inside ourselves! Such joy does not take away from the sober solemnity of this celebration. Not at all! Paul knew how to rejoice even in the most difficult situations because of his firm belief in the presence of the Lord. Jeremiah reveals that God himself invites us to the celebration: "*When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me.*" Indeed, he is close, as we hear in Revelation: "He stands at the door and knocks". [4] At the beginning of this liturgy, we sang, "Called into the quiet." Listen to God knocking at your door; let Him in; and rejoice in His presence!

St. Paul went on to exhort the Philippians to "Rejoice in the Lord always... Again I say, Rejoice." And we rejoice precisely because "The Lord is at hand"; and his name, adds St. Matthew, is "Emmanuel, which means God with us." [5] So **Rejoice!** is an invitation into the presence of the Lord who comes with pardon, who comes with healing, and who comes with reconciliation.

The Lord who **comes** to save his people from their sins is *close to each of us*. [6] It is the *presence* of the Lord, who rises over us like the sun of righteousness and comes to us with healing in His wings [7] in the sacrament of Penance. We are about to meet the same Lord who gladly goes to stay with Zacchaeus the tax-collector, the same Lord who says to the sinful woman: "Neither do I condemn you." It is the Lord who fills our hearts with joy, the way he filled the heart of Sister Geneviève with joy, and the way he filled the murderer of her closest relatives with joy – joy which is both the promise and the fruit of liberation and inner peace.

2. After exhorting us to **Rejoice!**, the apostle Paul gives us another, more difficult command, **Be perfect!** [8] This echoes the words Jesus uses to summarize the Sermon on the Mount, the essence of his message: "**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**" [9] This impels me to encourage you to recall your fundamental vocation, which is to reflect the perfection and holiness of God; because as Genesis says, *we were*

created in his image and likeness; and as Paul says, we were redeemed by Jesus, the son of God and the perfect image of the Father, in whom we have received our adoption as children.[10]

The exhortation **Be perfect!** Invites you to be true to your vocation as *a created image and likeness of God* so that, with your sins forgiven, you will be able once again to reflect his perfection. Not in a static, passive way, but recharged by the dynamic of repair and redemption—the way a torn net, once it has been mended, can again catch fish, or the way a damaged fiddle, once it has been repaired, can once again play a rousing tune. For St. Paul, something can **be perfect** when it has been restored to full functioning. And so this second exhortation invites you to mend and be *whole* again.

But you cannot repair or restore without first looking for what is broken or damaged. **Be perfect!** Is a call to examine my own life and review our life as Church: what is so broken or damaged that it makes me – or us – play out of tune or keep losing the fish? What are my defects, mistakes, sins or weaknesses? What are the attitudes, habits or tendencies which wound our Church, compromise our credibility, reduce our effectiveness and leave us so low?[11] We need to bring all these to Christ for forgiveness and healing. Then we can be restored *as redeemed and therefore trustworthy servants of God's household, as we read in Hebrews, and even more as adopted children because brothers and sisters of Christ, God's Son.*[12]

Be perfect and mend your ways! Is a call for intense introspection and examination of conscience, so that we can put all our broken ways into the healing and repairing hands of God in the sacrament of Penance – a Penance that can reconcile us with each other and bring us back into the embrace of communion with each other.

3. Next, with St. Paul, we urge you to **Admonish or encourage one another!**[13] Just as the gardener prunes a branch so that it may bear more fruit, Jesus teaches his disciples the need and manner of brotherly correction: “*When your brother sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.*”[14]

Without a mirror, it is hard to guess what blemish may be on one's own face. “The eye,” said Shakespeare, “does not see itself, except by reflection.”[15] To help a brother or sister see his or her fault: such is the way of constructive criticism. Where exactly is the fishing net torn? Which string on the fiddle needs tuning? They cannot be fixed or mended if the fault remains hidden; Paul tells the Corinthians and Romans. So you are not condemning your brother or sister but helping them to renounce the shameful things that are hidden and giving them encouragement, building them up.[16] **Admonish or encourage one another!** Is an act of communal solidarity; it is an act of fraternal charity if it is motivated by compassion, humility and love.

Our brothers and sisters who look in the mirror in order to discern some possible faults or sins will need to receive strength and consolation. Everyone needs someone to hold up

the mirror. Someone steadfast who won't leave their side. Someone to help them through their trial— like the murderer's difficult struggle to ask for forgiveness, and like Sister Geneviève's difficult struggle to forgive. So this third exhortation invites us to console and strengthen one another in the firm but gentle manner of the *Holy Spirit, the Consoler*.

4. So first. Paul has asked us to examine, and correct, and repair. "Okay," you say, "everyone has their own way of doing that." But no: St. Paul comes back with his fourth exhortation, to adopt the same attitude or mind-set as our Lord Himself. "*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*" Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi.[17]

The same mind and attitude [18] should clearly identify you and me as belonging to God's household. But not because I wear a T-shirt which says "Christian" or "Catholic" across my chest. No; everyone should be able to recognize a disciple of Jesus because he or she appreciates things the way Jesus does. Having his "mind-set" means seeing things as He sees them, feeling experiences as He feels them and, maybe hardest of all, forgiving as He forgives.

At the beginning, before and after telling you about Sister Geneviève, I invited you to ask yourself: could this be my story too? But now I am inviting you to go deeper. Can the life and death and resurrection of Jesus be my story? Can the forgiveness of Jesus be my forgiveness?

Think back to the Passion when most of the disciples violated Jesus' friendship. They betrayed his trust and broke their promises. After his resurrection, did they say "Sorry"? No. Did our Risen Lord confront them with their betrayal? No, he did not rebuke them for having abandoning him. And as for Peter who denied him three times, Jesus simply asked him three times, "Do you love me?"

It was very hard for Sister Geneviève to forgive her family's murderer; but he admitted the truth and begged for mercy. The Jewish and Roman authorities who crucified Jesus did not think of their actions as evil. They never said "Sorry." Yet on the Cross, suffering the worst, Jesus prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." [19] Unable, as a dying man, to forgive those who had betrayed, judged and crucified him, Jesus asked his Father to forgive them for him. When we find it practically impossible to forgive, then with the mind and attitude of Jesus, let us pray and ask our Father to forgive *for us* those who have trespassed against us.

5. ***Have Peace!*** Is the final exhortation: ***Live in peace!*** [20] Let me repeat all five: first "Rejoice!" Then, "Be perfect!" Third, "Admonish or encourage one another!" We just talked about the fourth, "Have the same mind and attitude!" And now finally: ***Live in peace!***

Like St. Paul, I urge you to **live in peace**, to receive and to share the Lord's peace, since as Paul says, "Christ is our peace." [21] If we have the mind of Christ, we must surely experience his peace. Indeed, as his letter to the Romans says, "*justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*" It is through our Lord Jesus Christ that we have obtained access to this grace in which we now stand [22]: the grace of seeking pardon and of pardoning others – "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Hear deeply those profoundly astonishing words of the priest: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This absolution restores us to communion with God and with one another. It is the grace of restored membership in the household of God.

We come to experience **peace** especially in this extraordinary way: while we are yet sinners, while still stuck in our sin, our Father comes much more than halfway to meet us with the reconciliation that Christ's dying has won for us. The risen Christ says "**Peace!**" before we even begin to say "Sorry!" It is, therefore, a **peace** that we do not deserve or earn, but which is bestowed on us as a gift. This gift of peace will transform us from within and transform our relationships. This gift of peace will make us bearers of peace in our communities, our nations and the world.

Conclusion

After his five exhortations, St. Paul promises that **the God of love and peace will be with you!** We began with Sister Geneviève's story of forgiveness and liberation, which we embraced with St. Paul's five-fold exhortation: Rejoice, Be perfect, Admonish or encourage one another, Have the same mind and attitude, Live in peace. After hearing Sister Geneviève's story, if we still dare to affirm God's nearness as the source of our rejoicing, then at the end, we can confidently invoke His abiding love and reconciling peace.

May God's abiding love and reconciling peace be on everyone who has sinned, and on everyone who has been sinned against, on those who have forgiven and on those still struggling to do so. May God's abiding love and reconciling peace be on everyone here in this great Stadium, and on all His people throughout the world.

May the God of love and peace be with you always, AMEN!

REFERENCES

[1] Mt 18, Ps 50, Jn 4, Lk 19, Jn 8

[2] Cf. *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin* n° 14, 9.10.2009.

[3] Fratres, gaudete, perfecti estote, exhortamini invicem, idem sapite, pacem habete, et Deus dilectionis et pacis erit vobiscum (2 Cor 13:11).

[4] Jr 29:13, Rv 3:20

[5] Ph 4:4-5, Mt 1:23

[6] Mt 1:21

[7] Mal 4:2

[8] *katartizesthe = perfecti estote*

[9] Mt 5:48

[10] Gn 1:26-27, Ga 4:5, Ep 1:5

[11] Cross purposes ... brink of ruin ... a horrid mess ???

[12] cf. Heb 3:5-6

[13] *Parakaleisthe = exhortamini invicem*

[14] cf. Jn 15:2; Mt 18:15

[15] *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene 2

[16] 1 Cor 4:5, Rm 15:10, 2 Cor 4:2, Rm 14:19

[17] Ph 2:5

[18] *to auto phroneite = idem sapite*

[19] Lk 23:34

[20] *eireneuete = pacem habete!*

[21] Ep 2:14

[22] Rm 5:1, 5:2