

Queen of the America Guild

Conference Sermon

Fr. Paul N. Check

Thank you, Your Eminence, for the invitation to participate in the Queen of the Americas Guild conference, and to give the sermon at this Mass on the Feast of St James the Apostle.

Bishop Madera, my brother priests, dear brothers and sisters in Christ...

The most important question ever asked in human history was posed by Jesus Christ, when He said to the Apostles: "Who do you say that I am?" It is a question of *identity*, and of course, upon the answer to this question—the Apostles and ours—rests our discipleship in the Lord Jesus.

But more generally, this is an example of a fundamental question of the branch of philosophy that studies being—metaphysics (a most important discipline for the study of truth)—and an expression of an equally foundational principle: that "action follows being," that action follows identity (properly understood). In other words, we can only know what something is for if we first know what it is. First, I have to know that this is a pen, and then I understand what it is for: writing. This is a microphone, and its purpose is to amplify the human voice.

These are easy examples of a profound truth of the created order: I will only know the fulfillment of something, the purpose of something, if I first understand its *identity* (in the sense God intended): what it is. And you can see quickly that if I don't use something in accordance with its purpose, I might damage it...or perhaps bring harm to myself. For example, a medication that, in its proper dosage, eases pain, can become addictive, if taken immoderately.

The question of identity, of who the human person is, of what marriage is...these are the questions before us during our conference. But for the moment, I want to address them in the light of the readings for this Mass.

The most quoted line from the Second Vatican Council comes from *Gaudium et Spes*, 22: "Christ the New Adam fully reveals man to himself and his most high calling." This means that Jesus, the Son of the Father and the Son of Man—that is who He is—that Jesus comes to cure our amnesia, if you like, and to heal our rebellious wills, by reminding us who we are—children of the Father—and by giving us the grace to live in keeping with that identity. Jesus restores our lost identity, our lost relationship with the Father, and our lost inheritance as children of God.

In the first reading today, St Paul give us a summary of the Christian identity...as disciples of the Master, we are: afflicted but not constrained; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. And most importantly, Paul says, by virtue of our Baptism, we carry within us the Passion of Jesus and the risen life of Jesus...the great treasure in earthen vessels it is our privilege and blessing to receive.

Nothing more important about who we are, about our identity, our dignity, can be said than this...nothing. We are a new creation in Christ and for Christ...we share in the Paschal Mystery, in Jesus' salvific death and life. This is what St Paul means when, elsewhere, he describes the purpose and fulfillment of the Christian life: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2:20)

And why do we have this marvelous and sacred identity? St Paul answers: so that the surpassing power of God, the grace of God, may shine in and through us. Jesus died and rose for me, and now, I am to die to myself, and then by the gift of grace, rise to new life in Him. We will sow in tears—death to self is painful—but we will reap rejoicing, says the Psalmist.

Let's take one more step. I think the second most quoted line from Vatican Council II comes just two paragraphs after the one I mentioned earlier...this time GS 24: Man finds himself, finds fulfillment in life, by making a sincere gift of himself. Think back to "action follows being/identity"...if we are disciples of the Master, if we are "sons in the Son" (as St John Paul II said), then like Our Blessed Lord, who as true God and true man, was a person for others, we must be and do the same. From today's Gospel: "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to *give* His as a ransom for many."

Perhaps without entirely understanding what they were saying, the sons of Zebedee, when asked by Jesus: "Can you drink the chalice that I am going to drink?" say, "We can!" Notice two things here: first, in scripture, the word "chalice" indicates "suffering." So Jesus is asking them if they will suffer with and for Him. Secondly, thinking back to the way St Paul describes the intimate relationship of the disciple and the Master—"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"—we see Jesus' invitation to *share* in the Paschal Mystery: "Will you, freely and lovingly, do for me, what I am freely and lovingly doing for my Father: drink the chalice? Will you share in my Passion so that you may share in my life? This is the way to my kingdom, to glory...there is no other."

Dear Friends in Christ: This is why you and I are here...to pattern our hearts after the Sacred and self-giving Heart of Jesus Christ. We may not always know what form His invitation to share His life will take or lead; we may sometimes be anxious or hesitant; we will always be weak...but as St Paul writes here and elsewhere in his letters: Jesus' strength is made perfect in our weakness, and His grace and power are sufficient for us. We know what to do, because we know who we are, and Who dwells within us.

This is the treasure we hold in earthen vessels, and that treasure reminds us, and shows the world, to whom our hearts are given.