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Retreat at Casa Maria of the Sister Servants of the Eternal Word
Birmingham, AL
July 18-20, 2008
“Enrolling in the School of the Saints”

First Homily

First Reading (Revelations 3:1-22)

1 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead. 2 Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. 3 Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. 4 Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

7 “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens. 8 I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie — behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and learn that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth. 11 I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12 He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. 15 I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. 21 He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

Gospel Reading (Matthew 13:1-23)

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat there; and the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, 6 but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 He who has ears, let him hear.”

10 Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” 11 And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12 For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says: ‘You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. 15 For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.’ 16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17 Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

18 “Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart; this is what was sown along the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. 23 As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Homily

1. Beginning of the retreat
 - a. God is so glad that we are here. He’s kept his appointment with us from all eternity.
 - b. The point of a retreat is to allow him to do his work, to put up no resistance, to ask him for the grace to help us to respond to what he will whisper to us during these days.
2. In the Gospel today, he talks about what this retreat will be like. This Gospel will be familiar to many of you from last Sunday, which was conveniently chosen by the Lord to help you get ready for this weekend!
 - a. He is the seed
 - i. He is coming to plant various seeds within us that he wants to see grow.
 - ii. He knows precisely what we need and he’s been waiting to give himself to us in this way.
 - iii. These are holy seeds. We’ll have a chance to talk at length about the purpose of this retreat in the first conference later on tonight — Enrolling in the School of the Saints — but for the time being, I just ask you to accept that the Lord is coming to implant within you his words, his very life.
 - b. He’s using me as the sower
 - i. My task before his is to speak his words, to try to plant them within.
 - ii. There’s a prophetic mission to the priesthood. The Lord makes every priest a prophet, and although, on occasion, some may become false prophets by substituting their words for Christ, my hope is to pass on his words, the words of the Church he founded.
 - c. Third is the soil.
 - i. Jesus describes that there are four types of soil, four types of receptivity, toward what he wants to do in you during this retreat.
 - ii. The first is sown along the path:
 1. These are those with hardened sensitivity.
 2. Jesus describes this type of person as one who “hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart; this is what was sown along the path”
 3. Notice that he doesn’t say that these are “evil people.” They may be good people, but they’re impervious to the work he wishes to do in them.

4. These could be young people who think that the words and work of the Lord aren't for them now, but later.
 5. These could be seniors who think they've heard it so many times that they already know everything they need. The great work of continuing conversion the Lord wants to do in them now can't penetrate.
 6. These can be inveterate sinners who think Jesus has nothing to say to them and who turn a deaf ear to his loving but firm calls to conversion.
 7. These could be people who think they already know the answers to the questions they have.
 8. We see this attitude in the Gospel among the Pharisees. These were "good people," religious people, who fasted two times a week, gave tithes, prayed three times a day, but most of them were deaf to the Lord's words, were hardened to receive his seeds.
 9. In the context of the Pauline Year, reflect on those people Paul encountered:
 - a. He found hardened pagans, like most at the Areopagus in Greece, who were so wedded to their own ideas that the seed of the word couldn't penetrate.
 - b. Or what we called the Judaizing Christians who thought that the only way to be a good Christian was to be a good Jew first, get circumcised, follow all the Jewish dietary laws, etc.
 - c. Even among good Christians, he found a real resistance to his conversion. They thought he was at first a double-agent. They couldn't believe what the Lord had done in him.
 10. Despite the fact that the seed was perfect, despite the fact that the sower did his job, it couldn't penetrate.
- iii. The second soil is rocky soil.
1. Jesus says this refers to one who "hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away."
 2. Many of us in the Christian life have this type of soil.
 3. We are open to God's ways and we want to please him. We receive, well, at least initially, the Good News with joy, what he plants; but our endurance is small because we really don't let the seed get deep, to change our life.
 4. When the going gets tough, we generally fail in our resolutions.
 5. In this Pauline Year, we can look at the life of St. Paul.
 - a. He found this type of soil, for example, in those at Antioch in Pisidia, when the Jews in the Synagogue initially embraced St. Paul's preaching (Acts 13) and begged for him and Barnabas to return the following week. But when they returned seven days later, and some Jewish opposition formed, they formed a mob with that opposition to drive Paul and Barnabas from the city.
 - b. He found it, as well, in St. Peter and St. Barnabas with respect to the seed God had planted in them during the Council of Jerusalem about how to embrace the Gentiles. They didn't have to follow the whole mosaic law. Yet when Peter went up to Antioch, he caved in to the pressures of those Jewish Christians who were not following the Council of Jerusalem and stopped eating with the Gentiles, and Barnabas followed him. The seed had not taken root and really changed their behavior, changed their lives. After Paul's fraternal correction, they changed.
 6. Fulton J. Sheen often said that after his retreats, he would be bombarded with people who came up to thank him for his words, who praised his eloquence, who said it was a great retreat. But he always judged the success of a retreat by those whose lives were changed long-term, who stuck through with their resolutions when the going got tough.

- iv. The third soil is among thorns
 1. Jesus says this describes one “who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”
 2. Again, Jesus didn’t say that these are “bad people.” Rather these are good people who hear the word and begin to act on it, but eventually the seed gets choked, not necessarily by sin, but by “cares of the world” and “delight in riches” or in “pleasures.”
 3. Let’s talk about each of these.
 - a. Cares of the world
 - i. We can be filled with anxiety or worries such that it’s hard to stay focused on the word of God.
 - ii. It can be worries about our family members, or about work, or about our health, or the tough economy, or a broken heart.
 - iii. If our mind’s on these things, then it’s tough for the word of God to grow.
 - iv. Sometimes we almost can’t help it. If we’re homeless and starving it’s going to be hard for us to focus on the word of God. But many times we choose to keep dwelling on these things. We need to let these thorns go, confident in the Lord’s providence and love, if we want his seed to grow.
 - b. “Delight in Riches” and “pleasures”
 - i. We can seek the pleasure comforts of life in such a way that we won’t embrace the real challenges of the Gospel.
 - ii. We can only be filled when we’re emptied and we might not want to be empty, we may be too attached to our own felt crosses with wheels on them that we can’t find the Lord in the real ones he gives us each day.
 - iii. Instead of “seeking first the kingdom of God,” we seek first worldly things, but we cannot serve both God and mammon.
 - iv. Instead of selling all that we have to obtain the pearl of great price, we, like the Rich Young Man, can often resist the Lord’s invitation and call.
 1. He kept all the commandments from his youth.
 2. He really sought the Lord and to grow.
 3. But when the Lord called him to place him above all his riches, by giving all of them to the poor, he chose his stuff over the Lord.
 4. He had good soil, who recognized Jesus’ goodness, but he wasn’t able to follow him because of his riches and comforts.
 4. Pauline Year: Let’s see how this seed choked by thorns is present in Paul’s time.
 - a. We see this among the Corinthians in Corinthians 5. They had heard and embraced the Gospel, but then the lure of their old sexual practices drew them away.
 - b. We saw it with many of the people in Ephesus, who initially embraced Paul’s teachings until they realized that they would lose a fortune by needing to give up the business of selling statues to the pagan goddess Artemis and so they drove them out of town.
- v. All three of these types of soil bear no fruit. All fail. The type of soil that the Lord wants for us in this retreat is what he calls “good soil.”
 1. This means one who “hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

2. There are three steps to having good soil, Jesus says:
 - a. The first is hearing the word of God. We have to listen to it. Especially when we come to Mass, we need to pay attention, but we also need to pay attention to the word by reading Sacred Scripture on our own, in silent prayer, and in the actions of the day. The first group of people, the soil along the path, don't even really hear because they aren't paying sufficient attention. This is the first step to bearing good fruit.
 - b. Secondly, we need to understand it, to let it take root, to let it sink deep. That means certainly we have to pray about it, we have to go to those places where we can comprehend it better, like Bible Studies or to decent books explaining what Jesus means. This is something that the second group, those on rocky soil, generally do not persevere in doing. They respond initially with joy, but they don't act on their good resolutions to follow through, to find out more, to hunger more.
 - c. The third thing we have to do is bear fruit. It's not just hearing and understanding what we hear. It's allowing Jesus' words to change our lives, leading to our bearing fruit in acts of love for God and for others. This is something that many in the third group, those among thorns, do not do. They hear the word of God, understand it, and know what they should do, but they just don't do it. Sometimes they even want to do the right thing, but they just don't pull the trigger. We've got to choose to order our whole life, everything, around the Word of God we hear and understand. God will help us to do this, but the choice is ours.
 3. The real test of good soil is the fruit the soil bears.
 4. We need to listen to the Lord's words in a way that it will really change our life.
 5. We also need to make resolutions, firm ones, at every retreat, about means by which the seeds the Lord plants will bear fruit.
 - a. The success of a retreat is measured not only by the resolutions we make with the Lord's guidance in prayer but by how faithful we are to them.
 - b. Please be listening attentively to the types of resolutions that the Lord is asking of you during these days.
 6. We need to receive these seeds with a desire to pass them on to others. We're meant to become like a good tree that bears fruit over and over again.
 7. Pauline Year
 - a. Paul himself had great soil, capable of bearing fruit 30, 60 and 100 fold.
 - b. We see it in Lydia, the dealer of purple goods, in young Timothy, in Priscilla and Aquila, in the Roman soldier who was guarding him on his trip to Rome and so many others that St. Paul names.
3. First reading
 - a. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."
 - b. The Lord Jesus is standing now. He's asking us to open the door.
 - c. He wants us to do more than open, but to come into communion with him.
 - d. That's what he makes possible for us through holy communion.
 - e. In the Eucharist, Jesus is the greatest seed of all. Reception of Holy Communion is to be like a nuclear explosion taking over our whole life.
 - f. At the beginning of this retreat, we ask the Lord Jesus to do just that. To give us good soil, capable of receiving him with openness even to radical changes in our way of life.
 - g. "He who abides in me and I in him will bear much fruit!" We bear fruit by being united to Jesus, the seed planted within us.
 - h. Let him who has ears to hear, hear what the Spirit is saying now!