

Address of the Most Rev. Luigi Bonazzi
Apostolic Nuncio
Atlantic Episcopal Assembly
Halifax, April 23, 2014

Dear brothers in the Episcopate,

I greet each of you with great fraternal affection, in the joy of the Risen Lord who goes ahead of us into Galilee: “*Go quickly*– says the angel to the women at the tomb – *and tell his disciples, ‘He has risen from the dead and now he is going ahead of you to Galilee; that is where you will see him’*” (Mt. 28.7). How beautiful, how deep and comforting this thought: that the Lord goes ahead of us into the ‘Galilee’ of our daily tasks, in our efforts as pastors, in the questions we have and for which we do not always have easy answers, in the joys of ministry... The Lord always goes ahead of us, so that, with him, we might become “*witnesses of the Resurrection*” (Acts 2:32), of the life that has conquered death. An impossible task if it were only dependant upon our own human strength; but possible and a source of joy for all humanity by the grace that the Lord gives us and by which he sustains us (cf. 2 Cor. 12.9).

Each time I speak to my brother bishops – as I have already done with the Bishops of Quebec, with the members of the Permanent Council of the Episcopal Conference, and with the Bishops of Ontario – I sense my own smallness. In fact, I have only recently arrived in Canada and I am just starting to know some of the pages of the long history of the Church in Canada. All of this makes me well aware of the modesty and limitedness of what I may say and do. But I have great confidence in the Holy Spirit, the gift of the Risen Lord. The Holy Spirit within us (cf. Acts 1:8) is the visible proof that Jesus Christ goes ahead of us to Galilee and is always with us (cf. Mt. 28:20).

I count upon the Holy Spirit, also in this moment, and I count as well and greatly upon prayer. Prayer is a great and concrete help that I can give you, or better, that we can give each other. To pray, personally and together, so that the Holy Spirit will give us the light to see the path on which to walk, the light to know the road on which to lead the people entrusted to our care.

Each day we must ask the Lord for the grace to be “good shepherds” who are in front of, among and behind our people. “*To be in front of the flock to show it the way, in the midst of the flock to keep it united, and behind the flock to prevent anyone from being left behind and because the flock itself has, so to speak, a ‘good nose’ for finding the way. This is how the pastor must move!*” (Pope Francis, Address to Pontifical Representatives, June 21, 2013).

We can ask ourselves: with what style, with what interior attitude should we live our ministry as Pastors? What immediately comes to our mind is the great pastoral rule of the Apostle Peter which he had learned at the school of his Master, Jesus the Good Shepherd who “*came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mt. 20:28). St. Peter makes concrete the words of his Master with this invitation: “*give a shepherd’s care to the flock of God that is entrusted to you: watch over it, not simply as a duty but gladly, as God wants; not for sordid money, but because you are eager to do it. Do not lord it over the group which is in your charge, but be an example for the flock*” (1 Peter 5:2-3).

It seems to me that Pope Francis – who has the charism of confirming his brethren in the faith (cf. Luke 10:32) – insistently calls our attention to a particular aspect of the figure of Jesus the Good Shepherd: Mercy. I think I can say that Pope Francis, with his words and by his example, offers us every day a luminous lesson on “*the bishop as an apostle and witness of mercy*”.

For Pope Francis, the background horizon that explains the figure of the “*merciful shepherd*” are those emblematic words portraying Jesus’ attitude towards Matthew, a public sinner, and revealing God’s attitude towards all of us, because we are all sinners: “*Miserando atque eligendo*”. God regards with love his creatures crushed by their needs and sin, with that love which is his boundless mercy: *miserando*; and he gives a concrete form to his love by showing immediately boundless confidence: *eligendo*, that is to say, by calling and entrusting a task. As we know, the words “*miserando atque eligendo*” were chosen by Pope Francis to explain his priestly vocation. They are now on his Papal Coat of Arms as a gift for the whole Church.

Pope Francis sees the bishop as a pastor who – dwelling among his priests, relating with the religious men and women, walking in the midst of his people – looks at them and always treats them “*miserando atque eligendo*”.

He has said this expressly: “*The ministers of the Church must be first and foremost, ministers of mercy.*” The Pope dreams of a Church that is “*mother and pastor.*” And he adds: “*The ministers of the Church should be merciful, caring for people, accompanying them like the Good Samaritan who washes, cleans and relieves his neighbor... The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost*” (Interview with Antonio Spadaro, L’Osservatore Romano, September 26, 2013).

How then should one exercise this ministry of mercy? Firstly, as the Pope says, by proclaiming, that is to say by making to resonate strongly the first proclamation: “*Jesus Christ has saved you!*” Yes, there are many things to be done, Pope Francis

seems to say, but the most important is the first and principal proclamation: “*Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you...*” (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 164, 165, 266).

Mercy must then be witnessed and displayed in our lives. We must use our hands to bless, but also to embrace. Let me recall in this connection the moving example given by Pope Francis in one of his homilies at Santa Marta: “*The image that comes to mind is that of a nurse, of a nurse in a hospital. She heals wounds one by one, but with both hands. God gets involved with our misery, he draws close to our wounds and he heals them with his hands; he became man in order to have hands with which to heal us. Jesus’ work is personal: one man committed the sin, one man came to heal it. Closeness! God does not save us merely by decree or by law; he saves us with tenderness, he saves us with caresses, he saves us with his life given for us*” (Homily, October 22, 2013).

Dear brother bishops, we are in the week after Easter, almost on the eve of Divine Mercy Sunday, when in Rome Pope Francis will insert among the saints two great witnesses of Mercy: Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II. These same circumstances – I think – help us, or rather call us – as Pope Francis prompts us – to regard our Episcopal ministry as a ministry of mercy. We are called to be pastors capable of drawing close to every person, walking by their side, as did Jesus with the disciples of Emmaus (cf. Luke 24:15). Of course, accompanying men and women absolutely does not mean adapting to the spirit of the world, considering as secondary moral teachings, or being unaware of the pitfalls of individualism, relativism and secularism.

No, to accompany does not mean to comply or yield, but rather to support. Pope Francis asks: “*Are we still a Church capable of warming hearts? A Church capable of leading people back to Jerusalem? Capable of bringing them home?*” And he tells us: “*We need a Church that kindles hearts and warms them*” (cf. Address to the Bishops of Brazil, July 27, 2013).

Together let us ask for this grace: for the Church and for each one of us. Thank you.