

**Homily for the Diocesan Mission Mass
Memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary
October 7, 2015**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, IL**

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Reverend Fathers [and Deacon(s)], consecrated religious, principals, teachers and students, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here together at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception to celebrate our annual Diocesan Mission Mass.

Two weeks ago today, I had the great opportunity to be present in Washington, DC for the Mass of Canonization of Saint Junípero Serra, a Franciscan missionary who had an important role to play in bringing the Catholic faith to much of what is present-day California. In his homily for the Mass, Pope Francis recalled how “Father Serra had a motto which inspired his life and work, not just a saying, but above all a reality which shaped the way he lived: *siempre adelante!* Keep moving forward!” The Holy Father continued by saying that the saint “kept moving forward, because the Lord was waiting. He kept going, because his brothers and sisters were waiting.”¹

This is at the heart of what it means to be a missionary. To be a missionary is to move forward, because our brothers and sisters are waiting, whether they know it or not, for the Good News of the Gospel and the love of God. In the case of Father Serra, he was going to people who had never heard the Gospel message and were being introduced to it for the first time. But we can also say that missionaries move forward to bring the message to those who *have* heard the Gospel already, because it is always important for that Good News to be repeated, so that it is not forgotten or seen as something of little importance that only gets spoken about occasionally.

In this regard, Saint Francis of Assisi is said to have instructed his brothers, "Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words!" That is wise advice, but one of the pitfalls of this saying is that it can be used as an excuse for not talking about one's faith, thinking that the Gospel is being sufficiently preached by one's good example. The problem with this is that often words are indeed necessary. We can do all kinds of good things for a variety of reasons, but if we want people to know that our good deeds are motivated by our Catholic faith, we have to say so expressly!

Using words along with our good deeds is essential to the missionary activity of the Church. Missionaries have traditionally built relationships with people by establishing schools, caring for the sick and feeding the hungry. But if they wanted people to join the Catholic Church, missionaries needed to tell them about their Catholic faith that motivated their good works, following the example of the love of Jesus Christ in caring for those in need (see *Matthew* 25:40). Otherwise, the motivation behind their good deeds would not have been recognized as being related to putting their faith into action. On the other hand, if we only talk about faith but don't put it into practice through our good works, our faith is empty. As we read in the letter of Saint James, "Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (*James* 2:17).

When we understand mission in this way, we can see how it is something that is not reserved just for those who are so-called "specialists" in doing mission work. While there is indeed a need for people to be those missionaries who journey to far off places to spread the faith, there is also a great need for the mission to take place right here so that people can constantly be reminded of that Gospel message. We are all capable of engaging in this type of missionary work.

Pope Francis tells us that “anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love.”² In other words, we cannot say that we are too young or inexperienced to be missionaries. All that we need to begin is that experience of God’s love, which is made available to us every day in so many ways, especially when we come to Mass.

Our first reading for today’s Mass offers a good insight for us to remember as we speak about missionary work. We have this humorous story about how Jonah is acting rather childish, as he complains to God about a plant that had been providing him with shade dies overnight. Jonah had also been upset with God for not destroying the city of Nineveh as planned. You could say that he was in a foul mood.

The Lord then calls Jonah back to reality, showing him how foolish it is to be so concerned about a little plant and not be concerned over the lives of “more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons” (Jonah 4:11) from the city of Nineveh. The Lord is reminding Jonah that human beings are the special object of God’s love, and how Jonah should have that same love for people and not be so occupied with things that bring him comfort.

This is a good lesson for us, and it is, as I said, important to understand when we talk about missions. When Jesus sent His disciples out, He sent them to people. Individual people are the reason for our mission work. We desire, as God does, for others to know the love of God and the beautiful message of our faith. Like Jonah, however, it can be easy for us to get distracted with a variety of other things, things which often leave us focused just on ourselves, our comfort, and our wants. We can be so occupied with trivial things, like our cell phones, our clothing, or our entertainment, that we fail to look around us and see so many people with whom we can share the love of God.

As missionaries, we always need to be moving forward with our heads up, to see our brothers and sisters around us and to give them greater priority than all of those things which try to keep us turned in on ourselves and not moving forward. As I said, all of you, no matter your age, are capable of being these missionaries right now!

A special place for you to live as missionaries is in your families and in your schools. Those are relatively safe places where you can be a little more bold in being kind, patient, obedient, and respectful. It will not always be easy, but it is the best place in which to prepare for whatever

form of missionary work that the Lord will call you to in the future. Whether you go off to foreign lands or have a job here in the United States, you will always be working with people and there will always be an opportunity to share the love of God with others.

The best way to prepare for your future missionary work is to engage in the missionary work that you are capable of doing right now. As you prepare to make your pledge of recommitment, keep in mind that important missionary work that you can be doing right now, and ask God for that help that He is very willing to give to you to assist you in being good missionaries of the faith.

Today, as we celebrate Our Lady of the Rosary, let us also ask Mary to teach us to see in those around us brothers and sisters united in the Lord, people with whom we desire to share God's love. She is the perfect model for us to follow, and she is our Mother who continues to pray for us so that we can remain faithful in the work that her Son has entrusted to all of us: to spread the Gospel to all people so that we can all one day be united as one family in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, *Mass of Canonization for Saint Junípero Serra*, 23 September 2015.

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §120.