

Mass on 6th April, 2017
At the Chapel of L'Arche, Trosly-Breuil
Homily by Mgr Pierre d'Ornellas, accompanying bishop for l'Arche International

The mass was concelebrated by Mgr Jacques Benoît-Gonin, Bishop of Beauvais, Mgr Gérard Daucourt, Père Jean-Frédéric et Père Timothée (Frères de St Jean et cures de la paroisse),
Père Phil Kearney,
Père Franck Guyen, Père Michel Lachenaud's secretary, and the Dominicans' Provincial.

Letter from Saint Paul to the Romans 8, 31-39

Psalm 84

The Gospel of Saint Luke 8, 40-56

'Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'
(*Romans 8,39*)

I would like to allow the simplicity and the potency of Saint Paul's words to resonate within us all without too much comment from me. Yes indeed, nothing will separate us from the love of God. I prefer to leave it to God to give us that love as a living word that resonates gently within each of our hearts, which is applied and soothes like a balm; a consolation; a hope; a new source; an unexpected peace, maybe also as a question, a desire or an expectation.

Listening

Each person has their own past history, and each history deserves respect. Our histories are dissimilar. Each one is precious in the eyes of God. He listens to each one in such a way that they become His own, through the covenant He creates with each person. God teaches us to listen attentively to each other through people with disabilities who welcome us. In l'Arche, listening is invaluable! It represents a road to freedom, because through listening to one another, we don't make judgements, we welcome one another as beloved brothers and sisters. I thank the women who spoke out so that they could be listened to.

Together, through listening, we seek truth and mercy to help us to be together as a community and to help each person individually, in the most appropriate way possible, with regard to their personal history, that of others and also l'Arche's past history. Each one of us, has already done what we can in our own way, but today, in a more precise manner, through the event we are living here in l'Arche, let us entrust our past histories to God. He embraces each one of them with tenderness and sensitivity out of respect for our vulnerability. Our fragility draws Him to us, because He is a Father, the "Father who is in Heaven" (Mathew 6, 32), "rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2, 4) for each one of his children. Nothing will be able to separate us from His Love.

The tragedy

Here today, at this important stage, we are all faced with the tragedy of Père Thomas. We are faced with the painful enigma of the two totally incompatible sides of his personality: on the one hand, a man of God and of good who consoled many vulnerable people, and on the other hand, a man who repeatedly committed criminal offences. We are faced with his words that on the one hand speak incessantly of God's mercy for the vulnerable, and on the other hand, an erroneous theological discourse from a priest responsible for announcing the mystery of God. We are confronted with a humble and loyal attitude toward accompanying, yet at the same time, we are faced with a strangely flawed posture in his accompaniment where true decency and appropriate reserve were sorely lacking.

Yes, today we are all faced with the tragedy of this painful ambivalence. Several people, physically or spiritually present here today have been hurt in different ways by this tragedy, some kept their faith in God and in the Catholic Church, others took distance from God or the Church.

Forgiveness!

My thoughts are for those women who have shared, or those who have kept silent, about the fact that they were sexually abused by Père Thomas. In the face of this suffering, which we strive to constantly understand and be more attentive to, I as bishop, with Jacques and Gérard my brother bishops, and many other bishops, I as accompanying bishop for l'Arche International, in communion with all priests in the Catholic Church through ordination, I beg forgiveness for these acts, which are in serious contradiction with the priestly ministry. I am ashamed of these acts. As you know, the Church is ashamed, deeply ashamed.

Some of these women are suffering because they feel deeply betrayed, in having placed all their trust in a man of the Church, at that place where they shared the most intimate part of their inner-selves i.e. their life with God. For what can be more intimate, more sacred, freer than our personal relationship with God ? Here today, as bishop of the Catholic Church, with my brother bishops, I beg your forgiveness for this betrayal that has wounded the most intimate, the most sacred of human liberties, believing in their trust in the ecclesial community.

Chastity

A priest's chastity, lived out freely, both on the human and spiritual level, is a priceless treasure, as he is responsible for celebrating the Eucharist and representing the One he serves, the Lord Jesus. This chastity is expressed through discretion and a distance that ensures appropriate proximity, it is expressed with reserve, through selfless service and with a sense of being a "worthless servant." (Luke 17, 10) without ever exclusively monopolising a person, nor by giving them the special role of an 'innocent soul', supposedly chosen by God.

I can see in the Gospel the genuine sensitivity Jesus uses, and the careful attention He gives to each woman he meets. Jesus' chastity is luminous. Why ? Because He is Christ, i.e. the one sent by God. He brings to earth God's infinite Love and lays it down for us. And it is in this way, and in this way alone, that he approaches each woman.

Which is why each woman can say in her own way: “Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It is He who goes toward her with respect and sensitivity. It is He who knows the immeasurable price of the act of the wounded, scorned, rejected woman who tries to touch him, but who cannot stand before Him for she doesn’t feel worthy to come face to face with Him. So the humiliated woman comes ‘from behind’, daring only to touch ‘the edge of his cloak’ (cf. Luke 8, 44). And Christ feels touched in the deepest part of His being, He turns around, He looks for the one who has touched Him and He looks at her carefully. The love of God he holds within Him is given in its entirety to this woman. Yes, nothing will henceforth separate this woman from the Love of God that He holds within Him, even more so because she has been humiliated.

As God’s envoy, Jesus comes with strength and gentleness to those who have been humiliated, to heal them, to cleanse them, to restore them, to help them stand once more. He does not keep the woman for himself, he says: ‘Go in peace’ (Luke 8, 48). For the Lord Jesus, this woman’s human liberty has no price! He trusts her implicitly when He says ‘Go’, but He gives her His peace as He lets her leave. Christ leaves His peace everywhere He passes, as I will state during the Eucharistic prayer later on.

Men of the Church

Peter the apostle (cf. Luke 8, 45) doesn’t understand the genuine bond between this woman and Christ. Peter stays with the idea of a superficial and trivial contact, based on ordinary religiosity whose sole interest is for what he judges to be worthy of the Master. He doesn’t perceive the very special bond between Christ, the bearer of God’s Love, and the humiliated woman. He doesn’t see the great struggle for freedom, nor the path of truth that this woman has had to take to dare to approach the Lord, and then only from behind. Today, as we live this event, let us pray that the men of the Church may understand, that they may be converted, that they may know how to listen and suffer, that they may discover how immensely present God is to all those that these two women in the Gospel represent and who suffer.

A man of the Church because he is a priest, meaning a servant of Lord Jesus, has the vocation to “become less” (cf. John 3, 30) so that Christ, whose servant he is, can “become greater”, so that he doesn’t come between humankind and Him. A priest’s vocation is to humbly retreat before the mystery of human liberty for he knows that, in his dismay and his righteousness, in his cry and his quest, in his wound, this liberty moves God who gives him grace and goodness.

The priest, whose vocation it is to “become less” and to retreat, must give ‘the Gospel of the Lord’ (Romans 1, 1) in its entirety, acknowledging the treasure placed in his hands, without distorting it with personal ideas, but knowing that it is the ‘Good news’ for the poor (cf. Luke 4,18), which comes from God and not from him. The priest can have weaknesses, but he must then retreat and come even closer to Christ in a humble silence to be purified by Him and to be nothing else, and increasingly nothing more, than a ‘servant’ (cf. 1 Corinthians 3,5) and not one who seeks to monopolise.

The unity of l'Arche

This Gospel, in line with the whole Bible, announces and reveals the beauty of the 'little ones' as the privileged people in the Kingdom of God (cf. *Mathew* 18, 3-4; 19, 14). Here in l'Arche, the 'little ones' through people with an intellectual disability manifest the potency of the 'Gospel of God'. Since I have known l'Arche, and I have had the privilege to be named accompanier, I personally have come to believe that l'Arche is the work of God. Many of us have received a lot from l'Arche. For my part, I give thanks to God for all that l'Arche has taught me and never ceases to teach me, even if I don't really know how to put words on this gift.

From what I know it would appear that from the beginning l'Arche, thanks to its ecumenical and interfaith dimension, grew in unity to the extent that it became a big family, which it acknowledged as such. The covenant with the poor, through the person with an intellectual disability, is the source of this unity, just as God's covenant with the smallest, the least, the poorest and the most unfortunate is, throughout the whole Bible, a source of unity for humanity. L'Arche has now reached a significant state of maturity, and it has discovered the harm perpetrated in its midst, an extremely painful and unjust harm. So, it is clear, that despite this maturity, much progress remains to be made.

But here today, I pray God, and may we all humbly pray God, He who is infinitely good, that the tragedy of Père Thomas that we face and which was revealed in 2014 at the time of l'Arche's 50th anniversary, not be a source of division in l'Arche today.

Let us ask God's divine mercy for Père Thomas and all those who have betrayed their priesthood received in the Catholic Church.

Let us ask the Lord of the poor and the 'little ones', our 'great God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (*Titus* 2, 13) to carefully safeguard l'Arche's unity in fraternal simplicity, in peace and harmony, in humility and joy, in compassion and trust. Let's ask God, through the hands of the poor, to bless l'Arche that He has called into being, to bless each one of us and to give us the grace and the ability to listen, and to give us mutual and fraternal compassion. By respecting each person, wherever they may be on the path of their personal history – I am thinking in particular of the victims who have taken distance from the Church and from God due to the hurt inflicted upon them by the Church - let us ask that we may always receive the grace to discern good, this small goodness that is accomplished daily in l'Arche and by l'Arche, and to know how to give thanks.

Yes, may l'Arche, that has given so much to so many, continue to be a sign that reveals that nothing will separate us from the Love of God for He chooses to be close to us in the depths of our vulnerability, He is with us in our past histories to free us from our inner prisons, that we have unjustly suffered, to gradually lead us to a new life of peace and promised joy.

In begging forgiveness for these criminal offenses, in begging forgiveness for these betrayals, I would like to leave you and share with each one of you the words of Saint Teresa of Lisieux. When she was questioned about what she had received during her dark night of faith, Teresa simply replied: "It is trust, nothing but trust that must lead us to Love." (Letter dated 17th September 1896)