

## Mass with Catechetical Leaders

### Homily of Bishop Barres

#### Immaculate Conception Seminary (Huntington)

September 1, 2021

1. As you know, *Eucharist* means *Thanksgiving*. As we celebrate this liturgy and offer thanks to God, allow me to express also my thanks to you.

Thank you for your fine catechetical and formational leadership. Thank you for living Christ and for your Christ-like charity with our young people and their families. Thank you for guiding our catechists, and especially in these past 18 months, thank you for your flexibility and catechetical creativity in the midst of COVID-19. As your bishop, I say it again: Thank you!

I'm grateful we can be together and celebrate this Mass of the Holy Spirit. How good and right it is to ask the Spirit to come upon us and guide our steps as we embark on a new catechetical year.

2. Our Gospel today from Matthew 8 provides the theme of this year's Catechetical Sunday – *Say the Word and My Soul Shall be Healed*. It also offers the powerful figure of the Centurion.

There is something so refreshingly straightforward about this Centurion. I have always liked him. I have always felt a certain gospel electricity around him.

He is a humble man, a faith-filled man, a disciplined, military man, a man conscious of the value of time.

The Centurion recognizes Christ's presence right in the ebb and flow of his daily work of military service. His "Yes" to the Lord is immediate, unconditional and complete.

He harnesses his experience of military service and military culture to live this type of radical obedience and trust.

This attitude is expressed so beautifully in his words: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed.”

These humble words echo through the centuries and stream through the Communion Rite. How wonderful that this Centurion, along with the Baptist who points to the Lamb of God, leads each of us to the Body and Blood of Christ every time we go to Mass.

3. From the vantage point of effective contemporary Catholic Biblical Catechesis and Evangelization, there is something I am finding explosively effective in a number of contexts that helps drive me to prayer and drive me to mission.

It’s the use of synthetic summaries of biblical mysteries and biblical characters that drive home a focused biblical theme. The strategic literary technique of creating a *collision* of biblical characters and mysteries around a biblical theme is inspirational and a “big bang” to contemporary Catholic Catechesis and Evangelization.

I’d like to explore a few contemporary examples with you.

Our Holy Father Pope Francis is a master of this literary-biblical technique but before I turn to him, let me begin with a passage that connects directly with the healing power of Christ in the Centurion story from Matthew 8.

It is an inspiring and biblically kaleidoscopic passage from Notre Dame University Liturgical Theology Professor David Fagerberg’s new book *Liturgical Dogmatics: How Catholic Beliefs Flow from Liturgical Prayer* (Ignatius Press, 2021).

Professor Fagerberg traces the healing power of Jesus in an explosive catechetical collision of biblical characters that illustrates the biblical healing power of our Catholic liturgy.

He writes: “Jesus healed. Liturgy heals. Liturgy is like the hemorrhaging woman being healed by the light stroke of Jesus’ cloak as he passes by; like the son who lay sick at Capernaum being healed at the moment when Jesus tells his father it shall be done; like the mother-in-law of Simon having her fever rebuked, and many others being healed that evening; like the leper who believed he would be cleansed if Jesus willed it, and Jesus did, and he was; like the servant of the Centurion being healed

even after his master confessed unworthiness to have Jesus come under his roof; like the paralyzed man let down through the roof so his healing could reveal his forgiveness; like the man whose shriveled hand was healed on the sabbath, when it is unlawful to do good; like the son of a widow rising up again; like the daughter of Jairus waking up from death's repose (to whom Jesus was going when he was interrupted by the bleeding woman); like two blind men whose sight was restored when they called out for mercy; like a possessed mute whose demon will no longer silence him; like a crippled man who could carry his mat though he never did reach the pool as he had waited thirty-eight years to do; like an unknown number at Gennesaret who were healed of various ailments, even some who simply touched his clothing; like the demon-possessed girl whose Canaanite mother won her parlay with Jesus by observing that even dogs get crumbs from the table; like a man who was deaf and almost dumb having his ears opened (*ephphatha*) and tongue loosened; like a possessed blind and mute man who could see and talk again when his demon was expelled; like vision slowly clearing when Jesus spit on the eyes of the blind Bethsaida; like a man born blind who saw the light of the world after he washed off mud and saliva in the pool of Siloam; like a woman who could straighten up after eighteen years; like the swollen man healed in front of a prominent Pharisee on the Sabbath; like not one, not two, but ten lepers; like Bartimaeus begging for the mercy of being able to see; like Lazarus coming out, being unwrapped, and let go. Jesus healed."<sup>1</sup>

We know each of these stories and biblical characters individually. When they are put in relationship with one another, when they *collide*, a biblical emotion and conviction are stirred and strengthened. We realize the power of Christ's healing mission is constantly at work in the sequence and narrative strategy of each of the four Gospels.

As I said earlier, our Holy Father Pope Francis is a master of this biblical-catechetical technique.

Let's go, for instance, to *Amoris Laetitia/The Joy of Love (2016)* 21, where the Holy Father shows Our Lord's healing power to the wide variety of families He encounters.

Pope Francis writes: "Jesus himself was born into a modest family that soon had to flee to a foreign land. He visits the home of Peter, whose mother-in-law is ill (cf.

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<sup>1</sup> David Fagerberg, *Liturgical Dogmatics: How Catholic Beliefs Flow from Liturgical Prayer*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021), 98-99.

Mk 1:30-31) and shows sympathy upon hearing of deaths in the homes of Jairus and Lazarus (cf. Mk 5:22-24, 35-43; Jn 11:1-44). He hears the desperate wailing of the widow of Nain for her dead son (cf. Lk 7:11-15) and heeds the plea of the father of an epileptic child in a small country town (cf. Mk 9:17-27). He goes to the homes of tax collectors like Matthew and Zacchaeus (cf. Mt 9:9-13; Lk 19:1-10), and speaks to sinners like the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee (cf. Lk 7:36-50). Jesus knows the anxieties and tensions experienced by families and he weaves them into his parables: children who leave home to seek adventure (cf. Lk 15:11-23), or who prove troublesome (Mt 21:28-31) or fall prey to violence (Mk 12:1-9). He is also sensitive to the embarrassment caused by the lack of wine at a wedding feast (Jn 2:1-10), the failure of guests to come to a banquet (Mt 22:1-10), and the anxiety of a poor family over the loss of a coin (Lk 15:8-10). In this brief review, we can see that the word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering. For it shows them the goal of their journey, when God ‘will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more’ (Rev 21:4).” (21-22)

Once again, we know each of these stories and each of these biblical families. However, when they are put in relationship with one another, when they *collide*, a biblical emotion and conviction are stirred and strengthened.

We sometimes forget Our Lord’s healing presence to families in the Gospels. Pope Francis’ litany of Our Lord’s Gospel presence to families reminds us that He is present to our families today – in every dimension of our joys, ecstasies, sorrows and crosses and longings for unity and communion in and through Him.

We realize that the power of Christ’s healing mission to the families of the Gospels and to our own families is constantly at work in the sequence and narrative strategy of each of the four Gospels.

Finally, we see the same biblical-catechetical technique in the Holy Father’s Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate/Rejoice and Glad* (2018).

Pope Francis reminds us biblically that Christ’s mercy and healing power are found in the small deeds and details of every day.

He writes:

“Let us not forget that Jesus asked his disciples to pay attention to details.

The little detail that wine was running out at a party.

The little detail that one sheep was missing.

The little detail of noticing the widow who offered her two small coins.

The little detail of having spare oil for the lamps, should the bridegroom delay.

The little detail of asking the disciples how many loaves of bread they had.

The little detail of having a fire burning and a fish cooking as he waited for the disciples at daybreak.” (144)

Once again, we know each of these Gospel stories individually but when Pope Francis creates a relationship and *collision* of these stories, he reminds us in an extraordinary way “to pay attention to details” with a contemplative spirit, to see with the eyes of Christ and the eyes of the Gospel opportunities for unseen charity, sacrifice and service.

Thank you all for being on Fire with the Scriptures and being on Fire with the Eucharist, the Mass and the Sacraments.

Thank you for being on Fire with Catholic Catechesis and Evangelization.

Thank you for the Biblical and Eucharistic Fire in your lives that illustrates to all you serve the words of the Centurion: “Say the Word and My Soul Shall Be Healed!”