



Homily – Closing Mass Religious Education Congress 2011ⁱ

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

This has been a great three days! What a beautiful way to conclude this Congress by celebrating the holy Eucharist together.

In the readings for this second Sunday of Lentⁱ, the Church gives us a lot to reflect on in light of our vocation and mission to religious education.

But before we do that, we need to remember our brothers and sisters in Japan who are suffering because of the earthquake and tsunami.

In this holy Eucharist, let us ask Almighty God to give them every gift they need, especially the grace to persevere and to find his love in this tragedy as they seek to rebuild their lives.

And let us pray for the faith to open our hearts generously to help our brothers and sisters in Japan, and to comfort their relatives here who are our neighbors. Amen.

My friends, I must confess, during these past three days my heart has been divided. I have been thinking a lot about the people of Japan. And at the same time, I have been amazed by this Congress. What a testimony it is to the splendid diversity of our Church! What a testimony it is to your passion to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

I was talking about these things with a friend. And he reminded me of the beautiful story of Satoko Kitahara. Some of you know her story, I'm sure.

But it is good to repeat the stories of our holy Catholic men and women. Because they show us the face of Christ. They are teachers of the faith — by the way they live their lives. They are models for us, for how we should be teachers of the faith.

Satoko Kitahara lived in Tokyo during the aftermath of World War II. Much of the city had been bombed out. The gap between the rich and poor had widened.

There were people, widows and orphans mostly, who lived by a river that runs through the city. The city called this place “Ant Town,” because the poor people who lived there were regarded as insignificant, like ants.

Satoko was born in a wealthy home. She had education and culture. She spoke several languages, played classical piano, and was trained as a pharmacologist.

She was raised in the Shinto faith of her parents, but had a conversion to Catholicism when she was 20.

After her conversion to Christ, she started to see the world differently. During a terribly cold winter in 1950, Satoko came in contact with the people of Ant Town. She was deeply ashamed. She lived only a kilometer from there — but it was as if she had been living in another world.

She met the children whose poverty was unimaginable. They picked rags from the garbage dumps and sold them for money to eat.

She started helping them and she started kind of school for them. For a while she would work with them in the day and go home to her parents’ rich home every evening.

But she realized she needed to work with them and to suffer with them. She needed to be one with them.

She said this: “To save us, God sent his only Son to be one of us. . . . He really became one of us! It hit me that there was only one way to help these rag-picker children. And it was to become a rag picker like them.”

Satoko Kitahara heard the God’s call in her life, and she followed that call. Through her faith, she fought injustice and she taught others to know the love of Jesus Christ.

She died at a very young age, 29, from tuberculosis, which she contracted while working with the poor in Ant Town.

She said: “Because Christ gave his life for me, if he wishes me to give my life for Ant Town, I would do so.”ⁱⁱ

The story of Satoko Kitahara is the story of every disciple. We are called to follow God’s call and to teach others about him; to bear witness to his love in our lives.

That is what Abram does in the first reading today. God calls him to leave everything. He doesn’t know where he’s going. All he knows is that God has called him to a special task — to be an instrument of his blessing for all the families of the earth.

This is our calling too, my friends.

St. Paul tells us that today in the second reading that we have been called with a holy calling.

Our calling is holy because it is Jesus who calls us.

Our calling is personal, as it was to Abram. But God's call is also a call to responsibility for the mission of his Church.

We know this. God does not just want to save some of us. He does not just call you and me or a select few.

God wants *all* men and women to know what we know — that he is alive, that he loves us with a Father's great love.

That means that we are all called to be missionaries, to be apostles. This is your task as religious educators. You are evangelists, missionaries.

The goal of religious education is not to impart information. It is to bring men and women to knowledge and faith in God's redemptive plan. It is to bring men and women to conversion — to know Jesus and to know the love and forgiveness of our Father.

You are called to be God's instruments. You are called to communicate his blessings to all the families of the earth.

My friends, always remember: You are a part of something greater. You are a part of God's great plan of love, his great plan of divine blessing.

This helps us to understand the lesson of today's Gospel.

I think it's important that we always try to read the Scriptures with the faith of the first Christians. They read this Gospel of the Transfiguration as a witness to the meaning and promise of our Baptism.

That's how we should read it too.

In Baptism, we "put on" the dazzling white robe of Christ in which we are renewed in the image and likeness of our Creator.ⁱⁱⁱ In Baptism, God says to each of us what he said at the baptism of Jesus, and again today at his Transfiguration — "This is my beloved Son."

This is the goal of God's plan. To make all men and women a part of his family. To make them all sons and daughters of God through Baptism into his Church.

The blessing of the nations in Abram is fulfilled in Christ and in the mission of his Church.

But we are the ones who must be his co-workers. We are the ones who must tell the world of God's plan of blessing, his plan of love.

This is what the new evangelization of America — the great continental mission — is all about. And you, as teachers of the faith, have a great part to play in this mission.

My brothers and sisters, the words that God speaks in the Gospel today are addressed to us: "This is beloved Son ... Listen to him!"

In everything you do, always be listening to the call of God in your lives. Always say "yes" to him in the obedience of faith. And as you behold his glory, always live to do his will.

As you teach the faith, I hope you will have the same perspective as St. Augustine.

With him, let us say: "we who speak and you who listen acknowledge ourselves as fellow disciples of the one Teacher."^{iv}

I ask that the blessings of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of the Americas, be upon you and your families always. Amen.

ⁱ Readings (2nd Sunday of Lent): Gen. 1–4a; Ps. 33:4–5, 18–20, 22; 2 Tim. 1:8b–10; Matt. 17:1–9

ⁱⁱ Ann Ball, *Faces of Holiness II*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24.

^{iv} *Sermons*, 23:2.