

**Mass with Catholic Christian Outreach
Monday, March 8, 2010
Cathedral of Notre Dame, Ottawa
Homily**

II Kings 5:1-15
Luke 4:24-30

I am grateful for the invitation to join you for this Holy Mass. It is a particular blessing to be in this magnificent cathedral with Archbishop Terrence Prendergast, who has kindly welcomed me to Ottawa. It is a special grace to celebrate this Mass together with the local bishop in his own cathedral.

I am grateful too for the presence of my brother bishops, in particular Archbishop Pedro Lopez Quintana, who is beginning her service in Ottawa as Apostolic Nuncio. Your Excellency, may your years in Canada be happy ones!

My dear brother priests, I greet you with special affection in this Year for Priests, a gift of grace from our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. Last evening in Kingston I spoke to the priests there about the Divine Office as a priestly prayer. The Holy Eucharist is all the more so. In this Year for Priests I pray that we renew our devotion to the celebration of the Eucharist – the most important thing that we do, the most important thing that can be done.

I offer a word of thanks to Father Raymond de Souza, who has coordinated this visit. He told me that to pray with and for Catholic Christian Outreach meant supporting the work of the new evangelization in Canada. It is a joy to so, and I would like offer a word of encouragement this evening to the young missionaries present, and all who support them.

In today's Gospel, the Lord Jesus returns to His hometown of Nazareth and it does not go well. He is driven out of town; the people who watched Him grow up are filled with rage. It is a disturbing scene. It is possible to find here some encouragement the young missionaries of Catholic Christian Outreach? How does this scene illuminate the challenge of preaching the Gospel on the university campus? Perhaps we can arrive at an answer to these questions with some help from our first reading from the Second Book of Kings.

The story of Naaman presents us with a contrast of power and weakness, the extraordinary and the ordinary. He is a powerful military commander afflicted with the disease of leprosy. He goes in seek of a cure, following the advice of his Israelite servant girl. He finds Elisha the prophet. He arrives at Elisha's house with horses and chariots, the entourage of a man rich and mighty. Yet Elisha does not even come out to greet him, instead sending a message: *Go and wash seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will heal, and you will be clean.*

Naaman is angered by what he regards as dismissive treatment by Elisha. He wanted the prophet to work great signs and wonders to effect a cure. He considers bathing in the Jordan too plain and too simple. And then his servants come with an argument powerful in its logic: *If the*

prophet had told you to do something extraordinary, would you not have done it? All the more now, since he said to you, 'Wash and be clean,' should you do as he said.

Naaman wanted the Lord to heal him in a spectacular fashion. He was willing to do great and arduous tasks to earn that healing. The Lord instead wanted to heal Naaman with utmost simplicity, in a manner unadorned, uncompleted, unremarkable. Wash in the river and be clean.

As Catholics we see here a foreshadowing of the sacraments – those simple signs of water and oil, bread and wine, which work the greatest wonders of all. The Catholic sacramental imagination teaches us what Naaman had to learn, namely that the extraordinary lies just on the other side of the ordinary. The proudest boast of the human race is an unknown virgin of Nazareth. The Sovereign Lord of the universe lies in manger in Bethlehem. The redemption of the whole world is accomplished between two thieves. The Risen Lord comes to us in the humble elements of bread and wine. The divine power to forgive sins is entrusted to sinful men themselves. This is the sacramental economy, in which the most extraordinary things are accomplished in the most ordinary way.

We meet characters both ordinary and extraordinary in this passage from Second Kings. There is Naaman, the valiant military commander; there is the King of Aram; there is the King of Israel; there is the prophet Elisha. They are mighty figures, men of power and influence. But who is it that persuades Naaman to seek out Elisha? A humble servant girl. Who is it that persuades Naaman to listen to Elisha? His servants. Naaman is healed and comes to know the God of Israel because of humble people, unknown to the world, who had the courage to speak to him about listening to God's voice, and heeding His will.

My dear missionaries, you work today in a campus environment marked by great learning, impressive technology and a vast array of options for personal and professional development. Given the sheer size of the modern campus, you may well feel small and isolated, a person of no great importance, like a servant in the entourage of a king. Yet you are called precisely to speak of God to those who otherwise may be considered more successful, more influential, more powerful in the world.

When you share your faith with others, simply and directly, are you not like the servant girl who tells Naaman that he needs to find the God of Israel? When you persuade your peers to return to Mass and to go to confession – sometimes for the first time since they were children – are you not like the servants who encourage Naaman to bathe in the Jordan? When you open the Scriptures to those who do not know Jesus Christ, are you not helping them to discover the cleansing waters of Baptism, where the leprous wounds of our culture can be healed? Are you not bringing others back to their own baptism, the graces of which have been buried under sin and indifference?

Yes, you are doing all this! Naaman needed his servants for his salvation. The Lord chooses to work through “lowly servants”. We should desire nothing else other than to be a “lowly servant” as our Blessed Mother described herself. You will recall that moment when Pope Benedict XVI first appeared on the central loggia of Saint Peter's Basilica; here was one of

most learned scholars and accomplished churchmen of his generation. How did he describe himself? *A humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord.*

We can now better understand what takes place in Nazareth. Jesus tells us that a prophet is not accepted in his native place. Why not? Is it not because he seems too ordinary there? The people of Nazareth protest that they know who this Jesus is, they know about His family, they know that He is nothing extraordinary. He is too ordinary to be a prophet, let alone the Messiah.

It turns out that they do not know Him as well as they think. His ordinariness blinds them to His extraordinary nature and mission. Is this experience not shared by Christians in every age? Perhaps you missionaries have experienced it. Are you not too ordinary to make a difference? Will your friends and family and peers listen to you talk about the Gospel? Are people not astonished that you want to be a missionary for the Gospel – not overseas, but in Halifax, Quebec City, Ottawa, Kingston, Saskatoon, Calgary and Vancouver? If you were told that it was something near-impossible to preach the Gospel on campus, something only for an elite few, would you not be intrigued and perhaps wonder if you were up to the challenge? What if you were told it was something as simple as setting up a table, and making some popcorn? If it were just that simple would you do it? Would it be too ordinary? It is not. The good news is that Jesus wants to do extraordinary things through you right where you are. This is the dynamic of the apostolate: Jesus offers us His extraordinary power. We offer Him our ordinary gifts. It is enough for Him, and He is enough for us.

I am told that CCO will be holding its next annual conference in Montreal, the city of Brother Andre Bessette, whom our Holy Father will declare a saint next October 17 in Rome. Perhaps some of you will return my visit to Canada by coming to Rome on pilgrimage in October! Brother Andre was a lowly servant, not unlike those who spoke to Naaman. He was the porter for the Congregation of the Holy Cross. He watched the door. Yet hundreds of thousands came to see him, and when he died more than a million people filled the streets for his funeral. He pointed them toward St. Joseph, so that St. Joseph would lead them to God. In terms of leading people to God, converting souls, and making the miraculous present in his ordinary work, Brother Andre must be counted as one of Canada's greatest missionaries. He did not go overseas. He couldn't go far – he had to watch the door!

May you benefit from the prayers of the soon-to-be Saint Andre of Montreal, that through the intercession of St. Joseph, patron saint of Canada, your missionary work may transform your native land. And may God keep this land glorious and free!