

Homily: 60th Anniversary of Mother Mary Bernadette

(April 16, 2021, In the Cathedral, Ranchi)

Most Rev. Theodore Mascarenhas, Rev. Sr. Lily Grace Topno, Rev. Fathers,
Rev. Sisters and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today the Sisters of the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Anne, Ranchi are commemorating the 60th Death Anniversary of their Foundress, Mother Mary Bernadette, Servant of God. On the one hand they are thanking and praising God for their foundress, and on the other, they are ardently praying that the process of beatification may advance smoothly.

In our Holy Mother Church many holy men and women, inspired by the Holy Spirit founded the religious congregations. The Second Vatican Council in its Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* says, “From the church’s earliest times there were women and men who set out to follow Christ more freely and to imitate him more closely by practicing evangelical counsels. In different ways they led lives dedicated to God. Many of them, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, became hermits or founded religious families, which the church, by virtue of its authority, gladly accepted and approved. Thus in keeping with the divine purpose, a wonderful variety of religious communities came into existence. This has helped considerably to equip the church for every good work and for ministry aimed at building up the body of Christ” (PC no.1).

The Decree focusses on two aspects:

- a. Many women and men of their own free will decided to follow Christ more intimately and freely by practicing evangelical counsels.
- b. Many women and men inspired by the Holy Spirit founded religious congregations, with definite purpose. The members of these congregations ardently practice evangelical counsels in order to achieve sanctity. Further, by their good works and ministries they build up the body of Christ, the church.

My dear brothers and sisters, founding a religious congregation is primarily a work of the Holy Spirit. At a particular point of history according to the need of the church, the Holy Spirit in various ways inspires his chosen instruments to achieve the divine purpose. Saint Benedict was inspired to reform the monastic life and wrote down rules for monks and nuns. He is known as the father of western monasticism. In the case of St. Francis of Assisi the image of Jesus on the crucifix in the church of Damiano said to him, “Rebuild my church, which as you see, is falling down”. In the beginning he did not understand, but later on it became clear to him that Jesus was asking him to rebuild the church not made of stones and mortar. He obeyed Jesus and many followed Francis and eventually a congregation was formed. St. Dominic founded a religious order of preachers to

combat the heresies of the time. St. Teresa of Avila in a divine mystical experience was urged to establish the Discalced Carmelites, an order devoted to quiet prayer, poverty and austerity. St Ignatius of Loyola made journey from personal sanctification to the sanctification of the church. He and his companions reformed the church from inside the church. Saint Mother Teresa was inspired by God while she was travelling on a train. She heard a voice in her heart saying, “I thirst”. Later she was given the understanding that the Lord is thirsty for love and for souls. Then her whole life and works changed. All these saints experienced ups and downs, joys and sorrows, consolations and desolations and even the dark night of their souls. For them it was the journey of their call led by the Holy Spirit. They were so gripped by the power of the Spirit that they could follow inner intrinsic divine inspiration and eventually founded religious congregations.

Going through the memoir of Mother Mary Bernadette, I am amazed to see how God accompanied and led her, like a loving, benevolent, compassionate, strong, supportive and like a far-sighted mother. By the way, the memoir itself is a simple and frank description of her sweet and bitter human experiences which in fact expose step by step the movements of the Spirit in her life. These movements are sometimes quite sober, and are fruits of God’s consolation. Sometimes they are quite dramatic and sorrowful. She and her companions were inspired by the committed religious and charitable life of the Loreto nuns. Listen to what Mother Mary Bernadette says, “अगर ये मादर लोग यीसु के प्रेम से अपने प्यारे बाप, मा, भाई बहिन, मित्र और कुटुम्बों को, हाँ अपने देश तक को भी त्याग देकर हमारे इस दूर जंगली देश में आकर हम अनजान गरीब और नीच जातियों को इतना प्रेम दुलार करके, हमारी आत्माओं को स्वर्ग में पहुंचाने के फिक्र से दिन रात इतनी मिहनत किया करती हैं, तो क्या हम लोग भी इन्हीं के सुन्दर नमूनों के अनुसार अपने देश और जातियों की भलाई के लिए नहीं करेंगी?” This is the foundational inspiration of Mary Bernadette and three of her companions. This inspiration grew stronger and stronger day by day and she discerned, recognized and accepted the divine call to live according to the evangelical counsels and nothing could deter her from this call. The tribal society along with her family could not understand and accept that their daughters wanted to remain virgins for the whole life. It was contrary to their world view. Her father opposed Mary Bernadette’s idea vehemently. Many eligible bachelors were proposed as her match. She refused. At one moment, her father, in his uncontrolled rage, brandished a sword to kill her. She remained firm in her decision.

Mother Mary Bernadette has described many more struggles and persecutions were given by her own dear ones. Many founder saints had to face oppositions and persecutions. St. Francis of Assisi was opposed by his own father. The family of St Ignatius of Loyola thought that his act of begging was downgrading the dignity of the noble family and wanted to restrain him.

Similarly, the Spirit led the young girl Mary Bernadette, who had many, big and small, sweet and bitter experiences. In all these experiences her love for and faith

in God kept on increasing. Simultaneously, the desire of serving people and saving their souls also grew stronger and stronger. In fact she could say, “If God is with me who could be against me”. She expresses the remarkable consolation and joy which she experienced after making the first profession. She is overwhelmed by grace of God and thanks God whole-heartedly. In this spiritual and human amazement and joy, her heart sings the praises of God.

The words of the Book of Wisdom applies to Mother Mary Bernadette and her companions. It reads, “After testing them as in the furnace, God has accepted them as a holocaust”(3:6) and “Those who trust in him will penetrate the truth, those who are faithful will live in love, for his grace and mercy are for his chosen ones”(3:9). Further as Jesus says, those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful, those who are pure of heart and those who are persecuted will be blessed by God. Mother Mary Bernadette has been blessed by God according to the promise of the beatitudes of the Gospel.

My dear Sisters, you are commemorating and wish to render homage to your Foundress. True homage will depend on the faithful acknowledgement and maintenance of the foundational spirit and aims of your foundress. Adaptations and renewals are a must in this changing situations of the world, but the teachings of Jesus and the particular spiritual inspiration of the foundress have to be scrupulously preserved. Otherwise the heart of the Congregation will be weakened.

As we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the death of Mother Mary Bernadette, Let us thank the Lord for choosing a simple and humble tribal girl for carrying out his mission. Let us thank him for accompanying and strengthening her in her sweet and bitter experiences. Let us thank him for establishing a religious congregation through her instrumentality. Let us pray that the process of beatification may proceed smoothly. May the Lord bless all the Sisters of the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Anne. Amen.