

Homily based on the readings from July 9, 2023 (Zechariah 9.9-10, Romans 8.9, 11-13, and Matthew 11.25-30)

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” In the Protestant denomination in which I grew up, these used to be called the *comfortable words* – not because they are soft and fuzzy, but because they should provide us with actual comfort.

Every single one of us carries a multitude of burdens. Many of our burdens – sickness, infirmity, being the victim of hatred or abuse – are sources of suffering. If we offer these burdens up to Jesus, he will certainly help us to bear them. But that is not actually what I want to talk about today.

The word *burden*, both in Old English and in Biblical Greek, does not really have a negative connotation. The word simply means *something that is borne, something that is carried*. In fact, in both languages, the definition explicitly pertains to a child in the womb. A burden can

simply be the hard work that is required to achieve a positive outcome – going to school, getting a job, serving in the military. The majority of adults here today are either parents of young children or were at some point in their lives. Raising a child, educating a child, nurturing a child – it is hard to imagine a task that is either more difficult or more fulfilling. I can still recall – quite vividly – the sense of amazement and apprehension when my wife and I brought our first child – our first beloved burden – home from the hospital.

If I can get even more personal for a moment, let me mention another burden that I myself am just beginning to bear. Yesterday morning, at the cathedral in Norwich, I was ordained by Bishop Michael Cote – along with four of my brethren – to serve as a deacon in the Diocese of Norwich. In fact, this is my very first Mass as a deacon. I am immeasurably grateful for the prayers and support I have received from my family – including my brother, who is the celebrant at this Mass – and from all of you, my dearest friends. To be honest, though, I feel almost as unsettled as when I became a parent for the first time.

So, the question of the day is: How do we entrust our burdens to Christ? The answer, at least in principle, is astoundingly simple. We pray. When we are faced with a difficult situation – a looming deadline at school, a project at work that is not turning out well, difficulties in our marriage or our family life – we pray. We all know the feeling of being so busy or so exhausted or so despondent that we have no idea how to begin setting things right. That is exactly the point where we should stop whatever we are doing and start praying. Go to Mass, go to Eucharistic adoration, pray the Rosary or the Divine Mercy Chaplet, pray the Liturgy of the Hours, just sit still in quiet prayer – anything that involves setting aside our own cares and concerns and opening ourselves up to Christ.

What should we do if we are too busy to pray? The answer is to pray even more. There are only 24 hours in a day, but God knows how to fill them much more effectively than we do. I do not want to minimize our own tasks and struggles, but think about somebody like the Holy Father, Pope Francis. Think about everything he has to do every day – his private and public audiences, meeting with bishops and

cardinals and national leaders, overseeing the vast apparatus of the worldwide Church. Despite all of that, he says Mass every day, he prays the entire Liturgy of the Hours, and he says the Rosary three times a day – and those are just the prayers we know about. Likewise, Mother Teresa, who accomplished almost unbelievable works of organization – establishing a religious congregation, setting up countless hospitals, orphanages, and schools – spent most of her day, every day in prayer. When asked how one person was able to accomplish so much, she simply replied “My secret is very simple: I pray.”

The circumstances of our lives, to be sure, are substantially different, but the same basic principle applies. No matter what challenges we face, God will give us enough time, enough energy, enough money to do whatever he is asking us to do. Whatever tasks he sets before us, God will make the yoke easy and the burden light. Whatever we do, we must never forget that God is the author of all our successes. He does not rely on “the wise and the learned,” but chooses the simplest and most unassuming people to be the instruments of his will.

Prayer also provides us guidance in determining what burdens God is asking us to bear. Are we called to married life, to parenthood? Are we called to serve the Church as a priest or a deacon, or as a religious brother or sister? The choices we make should not be based on our own perceptions of what we want for ourselves – or even on our abilities or deficiencies – but on the vocation to which God is calling us. Prayer is the divine dialogue, the vehicle through which God tells us where he wants us to be and what he wants us to do. We just have to be willing to listen.

The challenge for every one of us here today – young and old alike – is to pray about what burdens God is asking us to bear. What is God calling us to do? What is our vocation? On our own, this would be an impossible task. But if we are meek and humble of heart, if we open ourselves up to God through prayer, God will give us peace, God will give us rest. These are comfortable words indeed.