

Solemn Novena to St. Ann

100th Anniversary

July 17th, 2024

Preaching of Rev. Justin Nelson Alphonse, C.P.

It is so nice to be in the sun and I feel like I'm in India now. As we begin our sentinel solemn novena to ST. Ann, what a way to give thanks.

And as Father Daniel and myself were discussing about what topic we need to talk, and I remember the first word that came to us was gratitude. That we need to give thanks for all the blessings that God has done in the last hundred years. And we thank God for the upcoming years as well.

And before we begin this solemn novena, I invite you to have three different attitudes as we move forward. So that this solemn novena becomes something so special and unique in our life. The first attitude that we all need to have is a generosity of spirit.

The more you give, the more you receive in your life. I remember when I first came to the U.S. as an associate pastor at St. Agnes Church in Louisville, Kentucky. I had mass on a weekend and after the mass I was greeting people as they come out. And one of the parishioners came to me and said, Father, I want to introduce my husband to you. And he comes once in a blue moon to the church. And she was coming regularly to the church almost even for daily mass. And as she was introducing her husband, she told me something interesting. She said, Father, my husband really likes you. You know, I was just, I just came into Louisville just a few months prior. And I was so happy there is someone who likes me. And back of my mind, I'm thinking maybe I had celebrated mass well. Or maybe I preached a good homily that day. Or I did something good during the mass. So, I asked her out of curiosity, why does he like me? And her response was very interesting. She said, my husband really likes you because you finished the mass 10 minutes early.

You know, you're thinking back of your mind, you know, we are always restricting even to pray just giving an hour or so for the Lord. But when you come to the church, come with a sense of openness. Come with a sense of generosity.

As God is generous with you, God wants you to be generous in our life as well. And so, first thing that you come here when you come for Eucharist or when you come for the novena, always come with a generosity of heart. And secondly, come with an openness and emptiness of heart.

As Mother Teresa beautifully said it, God cannot fill what is full. God can fill our emptiness. Always come with an emptiness of heart so that God can fill you with his grace and with his love.

As Matthew Kelly in the Dynamic Catholic, he would say, whenever you enter into a church, always think about what is that one thing that will make me a better version of myself?

What is that one thing that will make me a better version of myself? So always come with an openness and emptiness so that God can fill you with his word and with his grace and with the Eucharist and with the blessings. So, whenever you enter into this church, whenever you enter into this solemn novena, come with an openness and emptiness of heart. And thirdly, silence, both inner and outer silence.

We live in a noisy world. And we live in a world, silence is very rare. And this solemn novena invites us to have silence, both inner and outer silence.

I remember the first time when I went to Birmingham as a pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church. And one of my friend priests invited me to go to Atlanta, Georgia. And I went with him and he had one of his parishioners with him. And she was driving and I happened to sit on the passenger seat. And since I did not know this lady and I asked her, tell me something about you and your family. And she started answering that question from Birmingham to all the way to Atlanta, Georgia.

That is two and a half hours' drive. I thought it was over. In the evening, I was driving and she was sitting on the passenger seat. And she kept answering that question from Atlanta, Georgia to all the way to Birmingham, Alabama. From that time onwards, I never ask anyone, tell me something about yourself or your family. You know, people love to talk.

At this Lenten, this time, this novena invites us to listen. Listen to God's word. Listen to one another. Allow God to speak in your heart. So, as we have these three attitudes in your life, let us begin this day with a call to gratitude. The first thing that we all need to do is to be thankful for God's blessings in our life.

You will often hear this beautiful phrase that I will be speaking about. Look behind and thank God. Look forward and trust God. Look above and praise God. Look around and serve God. Look within and find God. Look behind. There is so much to be grateful for in the last hundred years. Grateful to God. Grateful to our Passionist community. The priests who served in this place. The priests who proclaimed God's word to you. And the ministers who served at the altar. And distributed communion. And the people who worked behind the screen.

All those people that we have to be grateful for. And take time to give thanks for your parents, your grandparents. I have heard people speaking about how many people have been coming to this novena for the past 70 years, 80 years. With their grandparents, with their parents, with their grandkids. All that shows the devotion that you have for St. Ann, and we are here to give thanks, first of all.

And so, like the Samaritan who came back to give thanks to God. Like the Naaman who said, I will not incense any God other than the God of Israel. And so, let us give thanks to God for the wonderful gift that God has given in our life.

And so today, as we spend this day, I invite all of you to look behind and say, thank God. In what are the ways that I have to be grateful for in my life. And what are the ways that God has blessed me, my family, my church community, my country.

In what ways I can be grateful for. And as I move forward, let us trust him. If God has taken care of us in the last hundred years, God will certainly will take care of us as we move forward in our life.

And as you look above, what a beautiful and wonderful start we have of this solemn novena. The beautiful weather, the beautiful sunlight, all the blessings that we have. Praise God.

Look around, look around the opportunities that God provides you in your life to serve him. Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you have done unto me. Serve him. Serve him. Serve in the people that we minister. And finally, look within and find God.

I'd like to conclude with a beautiful saying of one of the Pakistani women who met with an accident. And she, now she's not able to walk. And she's on a wheelchair. But the spirit that she has is tremendous. And she inspires a lot of women and men in the world today. And so today, I want you to think about the gratitude.

And one of the things that she says, this beautiful quote that I would like to read as I conclude this. Muniba Mazari is the one she says. Live your life fully. Accept yourself the way you are. Be kind to yourself. Be kind to yourself. And only then you can be kind to others. Love yourself and spread that love. Life will be hard. There will be turmoils. There will be trials. But that will only make you stronger. Never give up. The real happiness does not depend on money or success or fame. Real happiness lies in gratitude. So be grateful that you're alive. And live every moment. Amen.