

Dear Sisters,

I am glad to be with you to celebrate this Eucharist and reflect on the Gospel as you continue to discern during this Chapter. I am given to know that the theme of the Chapter is, "Women of the Word, Loving without measure". I personally like this theme as it beautifully captures and celebrates the twin dimensions of your life and mission: spirituality of the Word ("women of the Word") and active mission engagement ("loving without measure"). It defines who you are: *being in the Word* and *becoming in the World*. In fact, the Gospel reading of the day offers some insights into living out this theme.

Today's Gospel reading is part of a long criticism by Jesus against the scribes and the Pharisees (Mt 23: 1-39) who have been opposing him and his teaching during his kingdom ministry. The chapter contains seven woes out of which two appear in today's reading. The key expression, "woe to you" or "alas for you" (Greek *ouai*) not only expresses Jesus' discontentment with them but also a sense of justified anger. For our reflection this morning, I would like to highlight its threefold challenge to us as Christian disciples and in particular, to you as women leaders!

1. The Challenge of Leadership:

While unmasking the religious leaders' inconsistency between their faith and actions, Jesus calls them "hypocrites" and "blind guides"! A hypocrite (Greek *hypocrites*) is one who pretends or puts on a mask while doing an act! The leaders who have been misleading others are called so because they put on a false face and pretend to be what they are not, seeking approval from others rather than from God! Likewise, he calls them "blind guides" for leading their followers away from God and his kingdom and focusing on trivial things of religious cult! We are aware that when a person is blind, he/she is not in a position to lead others. In Lk 6,39 Jesus asks, "Can a blind person guide another blind? Will not both fall into a pit?" Jesus, who began his kingdom ministry announcing the recovery of sight to the blind (cf. 4,18) and gave sight to many, uses *blindness* metaphorically to expose the tragic leadership of his co-religionists who were somatically seeing but cognitively blind in their way of leading others. Dear sisters, as you hear these words, "hypocrites" and "blind guides" may I pose these two questions: a) as leaders entrusted with authority, have you turned others away from God because of your rigidity that focuses on triviality of things? and b) as superiors or in leadership roles of various apostolates, have you been blind guides who by justifying ignorance as truth, misled those entrusted to your care? May your missionary leadership illumine and brighten the path of those who seek along with you instead of creating chaos and confusion.

2. The Challenge of Coherence:

Secondly, Jesus denounces the religious leaders' lack of coherence between words and actions and their exterior and interior disposition. Concerning religious practices, they were rigid and inflexible about the unwritten details but not the spirit of the Law and paid more attention to the peripherals than essentials of the Law which was supposed to establish right relationship between God and his people. They elaborated and exaggerated the laws that were convenient for them so as to justify their practice. By exploiting the poor and the needy in their community, they placed the laws above human beings. But for Jesus, any good teacher or guide of the Law should focus on matters concerning justice, mercy and faith. He relativized the laws in relation to humans in contrast to the leaders who relativized their fellow humans beings for the sake of the laws. It is noteworthy that your chapter theme envisages a similar coherence between

words and actions, interior and exterior attitudes for an authentic religious witness. As we hear Jesus' words of "outside-inside" distinction that exposes the dichotomy between *outward* appearance and *inward* reality, is he also warning us who are concerned at times more with external preoccupations than the deeper reality of our inward being? What more can we do (*magis*) to make words and actions, exterior and interior dispositions coherent and consistent so that we may not lose the "charismatic" dimension of our consecrated life?

3. The Challenge of Centrality:

Finally, Jesus criticizes the religious leaders because their focus was on the "Law" rather than the "Giver of the Law". As a result, they insisted upon the legality of things rather than the love of God. As disciples of Christ, we are followers of the "person" of Jesus and not of a "Holy Book" even though it contains his teachings in which we encounter him. The "Word" in your chapter theme can signify both these nuances: the *written Word* ("Bible") as well as the *living Word* (Jesus). Though this distinction appears to be superficial, the accent is placed on encountering the living person of Jesus who goes beyond the pages of the written Word. Our religious life has its foundation in the scripture but it is true that its centrality is in Jesus because it is him, we follow. Knowing the written Word is the beginning of a journey but encountering the living person and following him is the ultimate goal of that journey. May you be Women of the living Word whose hearts are set on fire like the disciples of Emmaus since you encounter the risen Jesus in your respective missionary journeys.

Dear sisters, my wish for you is that may you be accompanying leaders rather than being mere administrators (A); be believing team workers rather than blaming individuals (B); be creative and charismatic disciples rather than conforming circles (C); be dialoguing prophetic women rather than disciplinary dictators (D); and finally, be empowering testimonies, sharing your unique personal mission stories rather than endorsing narratives of an institutional structure (E). Amen.

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