

## ***The Gift of Mission***

Homily on the Ordination Anniversary of Father Edgar Quiroga of the Diocese of Yakima

*Jeremiah 1:4-9; Hebrews 5:1-10; Matthew 9:9-13*

May 22, 2021

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Peace be with you! Friends, I come here today as a pilgrim. One year ago, Father Edgar Quiroga was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Yakima – a mission diocese in the northwest part of the United States not far from Canada. I and other priests had planned a pilgrimage in Mexico to coincide with Father Quiroga’s “Canta Misa” here in Colima. But COVID-19 hit and the trip was cancelled. But here we are today giving thanks to God and to all of you for the gift of a missionary priest.

Both our Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah as well as our Gospel from St. Matthew give us the blueprints of every missionary call. Today’s scriptures open with the call of Jeremiah as prophet of ancient Israel. Jeremiah protests, “I am too young!” “I am just a boy!” But God responds: “Do not say I am only a boy for you shall go to all whom I send you and you shall speak whatever I command.” The same is true for us too. We do what we do because of the Lord. Because of the Lord, as priests we become more than we ever could, based only on our own skills, gifts, and talents. Because of the Lord we become more the man God intends us to be.

But how is Jeremiah to know what message God commands him to speak? Were we to read just a few more lines we would learn the visions that will guide Jeremiah’s entire mission as a fifty-year prophet for ancient Israel. “What do you see?” God asks Jeremiah. “I see the branch of an almond tree,” Jeremiah responds. “You have seen well,” the Lord responds, “for I am watching over my word to perform it.” That’s the first vision of Jeremiah. Jeremiah sees a “watching tree.”

Note this: In February, the early spring of the ancient Middle East, the almond tree is the first of the trees to bloom. It begins to bloom, not with new leaves, but like our own cherry trees in Pacific Northwest part of the United States. The almond tree blooms with five white petals surrounding a bright red “eye” or “core.” Thus, in Hebrew the almond tree is also called the “watching” tree. In Hebrew the word for almond and the verb to watch are nearly the same:  $\tau\tilde{\rho}\psi$  shaqed is an almond and  $\tau\tilde{\rho}\psi$  shaqad means to watch or to be awake. So, when the almond tree blooms, it is as though a thousand eyes are open and awake, watching after the slumber of winter.

“What do you see?” God asks Jeremiah a second time. “I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north.” Scripture scholars suggest the boiling pot is a reference to military battles. Boiling pots of oil could be poured down on enemies trying to breach a city wall. Boiling pots of oil slung over walls could combine with flaming arrows, fueling fires in a city under siege.

Taken together, these two visions suggest the blueprint of Jeremiah’s mission. He is to be a watchman against danger and a watchman for the Lord. Even today, we are aware of danger. This worldly danger of corruption, greed and violence is directly related to the internal danger of sin. The very word devil comes from the root of the verb to divide. God unites. The devil divides. Jeremiah’s mission brings together the worldly danger of Israel’s imminent invasion from enemies with the spiritual corruption of sin, most especially infidelity to God.

Yet corruption and sin are precisely what make the call of Matthew in our Gospel from St. Matthew so very compelling. Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector to follow him. In doing so, Jesus expands the blueprint of Jeremiah’s call. First-century tax collectors had reputations for corruption. Scholarship suggests they were easily bribed. Let your imagination linger on this point. Today, which group of people in society do you know who are easily bribed? Have you ever had to hire a “coyote?” Have you ever had to pay a bribe? Please do not raise your hands!

I raise this only to get at the shock value of this call of Matthew. A famous painting by the Italian renaissance artist Caravaggio captures this surprising scene of today’s Gospel. I have it posted on our social media. You can look at it later today on our Facebook page and website. The famous Caravaggio painting shows Jesus directly pointing at Matthew the tax collector. All the other people in the room register shock and surprise on their faces as they either look toward Jesus or look toward Matthew. Matthew does not even see Jesus pointing at him. In the Caravaggio painting, his eyes are cast down. He is looking at the table. He is counting the coins. He is focused on his money. He does not even see Jesus. But Jesus is pointing to him. Jesus is calling him.

This painting of the “Call of Matthew” by Caravaggio is Pope Francis’ favorite painting. It hangs in the church of San Luigi de Francesi in Rome. It aligns very tightly to the motto of Pope Francis: *Miserando atque eligendo* (Latin: “by having mercy, by choosing him”). Mercy is the interpretive key in today’s Gospel from St. Matthew. Much of theology links mercy with justice. Because God is merciful, we escape the rightful justice of God for our sins. But Pope Francis links mercy – not so much with justice – but with love. When God’s love meets human sin, the fruit is always mercy. God is love. God is pure love. God is flawless love. Indeed! But on this side of the grave, due to our sin, we experience God’s love as mercy. When God’s love meets human sin, the fruit is mercy. God does not call the worthy. Rather, God make worthy those he calls. That is the story of Jeremiah’s

call. That is the story of Matthew's call. That is the call of every priest, every bishop, and every Holy Father. Out of mercy God chooses.

This choice, this election of God, is not just about Father Edgar Quiroga. It is about every single one of you here today. Father Edgar Quiroga would not be able to hear the call from God to be a priest were it not for you – you who are his parents, his godparents, his brothers, his aunts, his uncles, the parishioners in the town where he grew up. By helping Father Edgar Quiroga hear his call you become part of our Church's great world-wide mission without ever leaving the beautiful states of Colima and Jalisco. Every single one of you is part of God's great mission. This is the reason why I wanted to come here today to personally thank all of you for the gift of our missionary priest in the Diocese of Yakima: Father Edgar Quiroga.

The same might be said for myself as bishop. I am the first bishop born in the Diocese of Yakima. I was baptized in the Cathedral where I am bishop. My parents were married nearly 65 years ago in the Cathedral where I am bishop. We spoke German with my grandparents. Yet today, three-fourths of the parishioners in the Diocese of Yakima where Father Edgar Quiroga now serves have family roots here in Mexico. That is about seventy-five percent of our parishioners. Most of our parishioners attend Mass in Spanish. Like Father Edgar Quiroga, I am also a missionary. But I became a missionary by returning home as bishop to the place of my spiritual birth.

Permit me to close with this final point. Pope Francis in his apostolic letter "The Joy of the Gospel" writes this: "I dream of a 'missionary option,' that is a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than her self-preservation."

Note how carefully crafted is this thought of Pope Francis. His dream starts – not with a Church – but with a "missionary option." Why? Because the Church does not have a mission. The mission has a Church. Your prayer and your worship, your catechesis and your scriptural study, all nurture the "missionary option" that lodged inside the mind and heart of Father Edgar Quiroga to come north as a missionary priest.

So, thank you! Thank you for being part of the call whose antecedents stretch back to Jeremiah and find fulfillment in Jesus. Thank you for listening to the heartbeat of that missionary impulse inside every vocational stirring. Thank you for living the Gospel in your daily lives and attempting to put the mission of Jesus Christ first in your lives. Thank you for the gift you are here in the Diocese of Colima for the Diocese of Yakima. May God richly bless the Church here in Mexico. May God bless each one of you too. Peace be with you!