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Homily of Bishop John Wilson at Mass for St Josemaría

At the Mass for St Josemaría on 26 June 2017, Bishop John Wilson, Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster, delivered the following homily.

30/06/2017

For almost ten years, while working at the Diocesan Curia, I lived at Bishop's House in Leeds. Every time we ate in the main dining room, I was reminded of St Josemaría. On

the ledge over the fire sat the small iron donkey given by him to Bishop William Gordon Wheeler with the words: *“Put that on the mantelpiece in your study, and every time you look at it, it will remind you to pray for me.”* Of course we know this not from any boasting by St Josemaría, but from Bishop Wheeler's memoirs. He treasured that little iron donkey, along with an inscribed copy of *'The Way'* he also received from your Father, the founder of Opus Dei.

How often St Josemaría expounded the theology and spirituality of the donkey. *“Try to remember,”* he wrote, *“what a donkey is like.”* - *“Not an old, stubborn, vicious one that would give you a kick when you least expected, but a young one with his ears up like antennae. He lives on a meagre diet, is hardworking and has a quick, cheerful trot. There are hundreds of animals more beautiful, more deft, and strong. But it was a donkey that*

Christ chose when he presented himself to the people as king in response to their acclamation. For Jesus has no time for calculations, for astuteness, for the cruelty of cold hearts, for attractive but empty beauty. What he likes is the cheerfulness of a young heart, a simple step, a natural voice, clean eyes, attention to his affectionate word of advice. This is how he reigns in the soul.”[1]

It was Simon, the fisherman of Galilee, the future Peter and 'rock' of the Church's faith, who, in the gospel, paid attention to Jesus' “*affectionate word of advice.*” St Josemaría knew that the early Christian commentators saw in the image of Simon's boat a symbol of the Church. [2] From the 'barque of Peter,' Christ taught the crowds, and continues to do so today through our Holy Father, Pope Francis, and the Church's

magisterium.[3] Each of us, by our life, words and witness, is the boat which Christ desires to preach from in the here and now.[4] St Josemaría reminds us that once Christ comes aboard the boat of our soul, our inner being changes.[5] Its horizon is expanded: *“it feels a greater ambition to serve and an irrepressible desire to tell all creation about the magnalia Dei, the marvellous doings of our Lord, if only we let him work.”*[6]

In the boat with Jesus, we too hear his *“affectionate word of advice:”* *“put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”* St Josemaría reassures us that it is Christ who is the *“master of this boat,”* and the master of our souls.[7] Remember again the little donkey. In St Josemaría’s words it is *“humble, hard-working, persevering - stubborn - and faithful, with a sure step, tough and - if fit has] a good master - also grateful*

and obedient.”[8] Jesus is the good master; He is our good master. It is He who prepares the waters for fishing and the fish within them. And it's Jesus who commands Simon Peter: *'duc in altum'* - “*put out into the deep.*” This is the Lord's persistent missionary mandate, given to the Church and to each of us. “*Throw aside the pessimism that makes a coward of you...*” said St Josemaría, “*and pay out your nets for a catch.*” *Don't you see that you, like Peter, can say: Jesus, if you say so, I will search for souls?”[9]*

Like the universal call to holiness, Christ's instruction to “*put out into deep*” is addressed to all the baptised, to each one of us, laity and clergy alike, married, single or celibate. If you ever doubt your worth or ability as a missionary disciple, take heart from St Josemaría: “*I understood you very well,*” he said “*when you ended up saying: 'Quite honestly, I haven't*

*even made the grade of being a donkey - the donkey that was the throne of Jesus when he entered Jerusalem. I'm just part of a disgusting heap of dirty tatters that the poorest rag-picker would ignore." But I told you all the same, God has chosen you and wants you to be his instrument."***[10]**

How similar to Simon Peter we can be. When Christ invites and asks, we reply by explaining why it's difficult, if not impossible, to respond. Every fisherman knows that the night time is best for fishing; and if nothing was caught during the night how on earth will anything be caught during the day? 'Lord, I hear you, but I know better.' - 'Lord, I agree completely, but not yet.' - 'Lord, I would if I could; but I can't.' Despite his hesitation, Peter reacts in faith. He relies entirely on the word of the Lord and he does exactly what Jesus asks. And Jesus, the master fisherman, grants a

miraculous, super abundant catch of fish.

“Continue thinking about the donkey's good qualities,” writes St Josemaría, *“and notice how in order to do anything worthwhile it has to allow itself to be ruled by the will of whoever is leading it.”*[11] Peter learned a lesson that day in the boat; a lesson he would need to learn over and over again, perhaps not unlike us. But he realised that day that the word of Jesus is powerful; powerful because it is the word of God, spoken with authority by God's Son. In the presence of such divine power, Peter recognised his unworthiness; he was nothing but a donkey, and a sinful one at that. But the Lord Jesus is not just a master fisherman; he's also a donkey whisperer, and he gently coaxes this Petrine donkey forward, speaking the most convincing word of encouragement: *“Do not be afraid;*

from now on you will catch men and women.”

And so Peter, together with James and John, *“left everything and followed him.”* As St Josemaría put it so straightforwardly: *“Jesus isn't satisfied 'going halves:' he wants the lot.”***[12]**

Maybe there are times when we all feel like the poor little donkey, tied to the spindle, walking in circles to turn a wheel that pumps the water.

*“Always the same pace. Always the same circles. One day after another: every day the same.”***[13]**

Our apostolate can sometimes seem overwhelming; our aspirations for holiness can seem beyond us and the offering of our work too challenging. Our faith can feel lukewarm and our charity running thin. Every second, into each moment, Jesus speak a saving word of divine power: *“Do not*

be afraid; put out into the deep for a catch.”

Without the donkey's fidelity, the water-wheel would never turn. If the donkey gave up, *“there would be no ripeness in the fruit, nor blossom in the orchard, nor scent of flowers in the garden.”*[14] *“Carry this thought,”* said St Josemaría, *“into your interior life.”*[15]

“Put [this donkey] on the mantelpiece in your study, and every time you look at it, it will remind you to pray for me.” St Josemaría, I know personally the efficacy of your intercession. Today, we ask you to pray for us and for the Church. We give thanks to Almighty God for your inspiring example: through the sanctification of work, the beauty of holiness, and the cheerfulness of heart lived with the supernatural outlook of faith.

St Josemaría may your words come true in us: *“Dear Jesus, you have*

made me your little donkey. Please don't leave me and I will stay with you always. Lead me, tightly harnessed by your grace: you have led me by the halter; make me do your will. And so I will love you for ever and ever. ^[16]
Amen

[1] Christ is Passing By, 181

[2] The Navarre Bible – St Luke, 82

[3] The Navarre Bible – St Luke, 82-83

[4] The Navarre Bible – St Luke, 83

[5] Friends of God 265, quoted in The Navarre Bible – St Luke, 83

[6] Friends of God 265, quoted in The Navarre Bible – St Luke, 83

[7] Friends of God 260, quoted in The Navarre Bible – St Luke, 83

[8] The Forge 880

[9] The Way 792, quoted in The
Navarre Bible – St Luke, 83

[10] The Forge 607

[11] The Forge 381

[12] The Way 155 quoted in The
Navarre Bible – St Luke, 83

[13] The Way 998

[14] The Way 998

[15] The Way 998

[16] The Forge 381