

## Homily - Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Brothers and sisters: I should like you to be free of anxieties.”

I think it’s fair to say that our modern age is, in large part, one that is characterized by a great deal of anxiety.

There are, of course, almost countless dimensions and factors in this experience.

Some are, as we would expect, driven by our over-awareness of global and societal issues and conflicts of all types.

Some are environmental, shaped by the structure and actions of our daily lives.

Some, perhaps, may be inflicted upon us by outside forces.

But how often do we consider what the apostle is talking about here - a different kind, or dimension of anxiety, one that is not only a matter of mental and psychological well-being, but of our very soul?

Every one of these dimensions is of profound importance, but our soul is often the one most easily neglected, because by its very nature our spiritual life has the fewest clear exterior signs for us to notice when we’re not healthy.

In the larger context of his reflection, Saint Paul is suggesting that this sort of anxiety is most noticeable in where we choose to direct our attention and concern.

The case he makes is one that is probably striking to most of us: Marriage.

Marriage, as a state in life, brings with it all sorts of obligations and commitments to relationships that have to be balanced along with one’s relationship to the Lord.

As the apostle puts it,

“An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord.”

There is an important point to unpack here, relevant to all of us - married, single, or consecrated.

In this passage we hear one of the principles that gave rise to the movement that would become formalized as the consecrated life in the Catholic Church - our religious brothers, sisters, monks, nuns, friars, hermits, consecrated virgins, and in recent decades consecrated lay men and women in various forms of that life.

All are different, beautiful ways of life, ordered intentionally toward a single goal: what Saint Paul calls “adherence to the Lord without distraction.”

Later this week, in fact, the Church will recognize and highlight these vocations on Friday, which is recognized as the World Day for Consecrated Life.

Pope John Paul the Second, introducing his apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, wrote, “In every age there have been men and women who, obedient to the Father's call and to the prompting of the Spirit, have chosen this special way of following Christ, in order to devote themselves to him with an "undivided" heart.

Like the Apostles, they too have left everything behind in order to be with Christ and to put themselves, as he did, at the service of God and their brothers and sisters.

In this way, through the many charisms of spiritual and apostolic life bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit, they have helped to make the mystery and mission of the Church shine forth, and in doing so have contributed to the renewal of society.”

That last sentence is key: Regardless of whether or not we ourselves are called to a consecrated vocation ourselves, when we encounter the witness of someone living out that kind of life and charism, they become a walking reminder to us that our life as Christians is not about this world - our destiny and our goal is heaven.

Spiritual anxiety, by contrast, sets in when we become perpetually distracted and fixated on things of this world, letting them consume our minds and hearts to the point that we center our time, our families, and lives on superficial desires or worldly expectations that are ultimately less important than the path on which God is leading us.

It isn't a type of anxiety that is easily noticed, but you may find it in the moments of restlessness, the lack of inner peace, the knowledge that so many things we are concerned with today will pass away in time.

And so the Lord invites us - be free.

I want to be clear, this isn't saying we need to abandon all these important obligations, relationships, and commitments in order to follow the Lord's plan.

In fact, they're *part* of his plan, but for that to happen, he needs to really be at the heart of everything else in our lives. That's the beautiful paradox of the Christian life, that when God is the center of our existence, everything else falls into its proper place and balance.

That's how we find peace.

It's true, there will still be challenging moments of changes and sacrifices.

Anyone who has gone through a radical experience of conversion can tell you, the process of detaching from many of these things can be uncomfortable - and in some cases even a shocking experience, much as when Jesus himself rebuked the unclean spirits that had taken possession of his people.

I think that's why we often resist the call to really re-order our lives as Christians to place the Lord at the center.

We don't want to be weird. We don't want to stick out. We don't want to be the one person or the one family not doing what everyone else is doing.

And so we try to force our relationship with God into whatever space is left in our lives once after we've filled it with all those other wants and expectations, and expect that somehow there will be enough room to fit him in.

But God is too big to ever be anything less than the heart of our very existence.

To think otherwise is to completely misunderstand who he is, who we are, and how our hearts were made to love.

Not just for today, not just for passing worldly pleasures, but for eternity, and infinity.

It's no wonder that our hearts grow anxious when we deprive them of the one thing that is beautiful enough to satisfy them, and great enough to never be exhausted.

I would encourage you to make this a question you bring to prayer throughout this week and the seasons to come. Where is my heart divided?

Where have the voices of the world drowned out the Lord's call to holiness?

Yes, so many obligations and activities will still be there even when we are fully living God's plan - but even then, we can ask: within all the busyness and the noise, is the Lord really at the heart of it all?

And if not, what needs to be removed so that he can truly be the center of my life?

Trust him enough to make that choice - because more than anything, the Lord wants you to be at peace, to be liberated from the spiritual anxieties of this age - he wants you to be... with him.

And through the graces of prayer, these sacraments we celebrate, and the help of his Spirit, he will be there every step of the way to support us and walk with us on that journey.

So don't be afraid to choose - to be free.