

**Federation of Catholic Bishops Conference of Oceania (FCBCO)**

**Opening Mass, General Assembly**

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 5 February 2023

Card. Michael Czerny S.J.

*Is 58:7-10 Your light will rise like the dawn.*

*Ps 111 The righteous shines as light*

*1 Cor 2:1-5 May your faith rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.*

*Mt 5:13-16 You are the light of the world.*

This Sunday, Jesus uses two images to teach his disciples about the meaning of Christian witness and mission: salt and light. This comes right after last Sunday's gospel, the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are a truly rich and varied set of hints on how **to be** and **to act** in a supremely worthy manner. They are such beautiful statements, but also puzzling and mysterious. So immediately after, Jesus reassuringly provides two images that we can grasp more easily: salt and light.

Salt has many uses; some have been known since ancient times. In the ancient Middle East, and maybe here in the Pacific region too, salt was very useful, to preserve food and to dress wounds. Over the centuries, it became a symbol of sincerity and of covenant. Like salt, God's love preserves people from corruption and heals their sinful wounds.

Light, in the book of Genesis, appears as the first work of creation. It is so important: Light is compared to God's own Word, the original source of life, on which the existence and well-being of all creatures depends. The Word of God and light became so tightly paired in the faith awareness of the People of Israel that they are jointly celebrated by the psalmist, who exclaims with astonishment and gratitude: "Lamp for my steps is your word, light on my path" (Ps 119:105).

The first reading, taken from the prophet Isaiah, also employs the image of light to describe the dynamism of renewal that happens in us when, with faith and in the name of the Lord, we place ourselves at the service of our neighbour: "If you open your heart to the hungry, if you satisfy the afflicted in heart, then your light will shine in the darkness, your darkness will be like the noontide" (58:10). :

When we perform acts of justice like those that Isaiah lists - sharing food, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, not averting our eyes from another's suffering – we not only touch real life. In addition, a window opens – this is our experience! – through which God's love enters us like light, bringing clarity, infusing warmth, radiating peace.

What else might we do, in addition to what the prophet suggests? We go back to the Beatitudes for inspiration. We recall the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, from protecting the defenceless and visiting the sick or imprisoned, to one that Pope Francis added a few years ago: caring for our common home, preserving and guarding it from the climate changes that threaten its future.

"Salt" and "light" also describe Christianity as an existential condition, a way of life, to be communicated, to be spread. Salt dissolves in food and light spreads in the environment, but neither salt nor light is 'lost' without first giving flavour to a dish or resting on something and making it shine.

At the same time, 'salt' and 'light' speak of a relationship: salt is not for itself, but to bring flavour to a dish; light does not brighten itself, in fact it is invisible until it illuminates something. Here is a hint of the mystery of the Cross and the new Risen Life.

What we are, becomes genuine and real in the relationships we establish with others. To be salt of the earth and light of the world, we must rediscover the beautiful strength of being siblings in Christ.

As Pope Francis reminds us in *Fratelli tutti*, his most recent encyclical, we are called not only **to do** good but **to be** good, to want the good of others. If as baptised people we do not learn to love as children of God and live as siblings in Christ, our existence falls into insignificance, and our witness as Church becomes insipid and dull.

We are not made the 'body of Christ' in order to shut ourselves in and be protected from the world. Rather, we are incorporated into the Church in order to be blended into history like salt and light. Is the passion for Christ not worth taking some risks? Jesus accompanies our steps and keeps sending the Holy Spirit: does this not change our sense of the risks?

This is what we can also learn from the lived experience of the saints.

When a journalist asked Mother Teresa of Calcutta to tell how she understood that God was calling her to do those many works that were springing up all over the world, she answered without hesitation: "I was not called to do works. I am called to be faithful to God, who then does his works as he wishes. I am just a pencil in his hands."

Let us never forget that, as disciples of Christ, we live not by our own light, our salt comes not from ourselves. What gives light and taste comes from our creating and saving and sanctifying God. As disciples called to live according to the design of the Beatitudes, let us learn to recognise what is true, good and beautiful in others and promote these their gifts. Otherwise, our life becomes a dull torch, a dimmed candle, tasteless salt – neither a help to others nor a gift to ourselves.

May God abundantly enlighten and season this General Assembly of the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conference of Oceania. Amen