

**Homily by Father Edward J. Chiffriller, SSJ,
Superior General of the Josephites
on the Occasion of the Centennial Mass
of the Knights and Ladies of St. Peter Claver.
August 2, 2009**

In the name of our Josephite priests, brothers, seminarians and novices, I wish to thank our National Chaplain Bishop Joseph Perry, our Supreme Knight Gene Phillips, Sr., and our Supreme Lady, Geralyn Shelvin and the Executive Board for the invitation to be the homilist at today's convention Mass celebrating the 100 anniversary of the founding of the Knights of Peter Claver. It's an honor for me as Superior General and it's an honor for the Josephite Society.

The Josephites are rightfully proud of the role that four of our priests, Fathers Conrad Rebersher, Joseph Van Basst, John Dorsey and Samuel Kelly along with Honorable Frank Collins, Gilbert Faustina, and Frank Trenier had in establishing our noble order on November 7, 1909. Sixteen years earlier in 1893 five Mill Hill missionary priests separated from their Society in London to form an independent American community dedicated exclusively to serve the spiritual, educational and social needs of people of African decent living in the United States.

In 1909 when our noble order was established the Church like our country was guilty of and suffered from the sin of racism and discrimination. Negro Catholics, as they were called then, worshiped in segregated churches, or if they attended "so called" white parishes they were subjected to the indignity and humiliation of sitting in designated "colored only" pews in the back of the church or in the choir loft. They approached the communion rail to receive the Body and Blood of Christ only after the white parishioners were served communion first. In spite of all this they remained faithful to their Catholic faith. It's amazing what God's grace can do.

On September 16, 1909 Fr. Conrad Rebersher wrote to our Superior General, Fr. Jutin McCarthy explaining the plan to organize a national Catholic fraternal association of Colored men. Fr. Rebersher was concerned because the men of our parishes could not join white Catholic fraternal organizations and were being lost to Colored fraternal organizations like the Knights of Pythias. Fr. Rebersher stated that thirty-two men attended the first meeting at Most Pure Heart of Mary Church in Mobile to explore the establishment of the new organization they were going to call the Knights of Peter Claver. His dream was that the organization would spread to across the Gulf Coast to New Orleans and beyond. In his letter Fr. Rebersher spoke about his plan to divide a classroom in the school for use as a meeting room where the Knights would meet. He ends his letter to Fr. McCarthy saying "When

you were here you promised me a good donation in the event that we organized the Society, and if it is convenient for you, I would be very glad to receive the donation now.” I don’t know how much that donation was.

At 5 pm on Sunday November 7, 1909 after Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament at Most Pure Heart of Mary Church forty men took the first initiation of this new Catholic fraternal organization known as the Knights of Peter Claver. Earlier that morning the forty men went to Holy Communion in a body in the presence of Bishop E. P. Allen, Bishop of Mobile and Fathers Rebesher, Dorsey and Kelly. Father John Dorsey the second African American Josephite priest gave a rousing sermon challenging the men to give good Christian example and calling them to fidelity to the Order. The following week 18 more men were initiated into the Chastang Council #2 and two men were initiated into Mon Louis Council #3. In February 1910 Council #4 was founded in Scranton, Mississippi. Thus, was the beginning of the Knights of Peter Claver.

Today at this Eucharist, the Church’s prayer of Thanksgiving, we give thanks to God for the many, many blessings that have come to the Catholic Church in the United States and now in Colombia, South America from the life and ministry of the Knights of Peter Claver, the Knights of Peter Claver Ladies Auxiliary, the Junior Knights and Junior Daughters of Peter Claver during these past 100 years. It is not coincidental; in fact it is providential, that the Knights of Peter Claver and the NAACP were founded in the same year. Both organizations have been critically important in confronting and eliminating racism and discrimination from our Church and country.

The progress that has been made during the past 100 years was the direct result of the dedication, sacrifice and commitment of thousands of individuals from both organizations. The progress that has been made in our country is evident in the election of President Barack Obama as the first African American President of the United States. The progress that has been made in our Church is evident in the appointment of Archbishop Wilton Gregory as Archbishop of Atlanta as well as in the appointment and leadership of our other African American Ordinaries and Auxiliary Bishops.

I may add, the Josephites are especially proud of our Bishop John Ricard who this year is celebrating his 25th anniversary as Bishop. God willing, we look forward to the appointment of more African American bishops in the near future. The job is not done. The Kingdom is not complete. The leadership of the Knights of Peter Claver, the Knights of Peter Claver Ladies Auxiliary, the Junior Knights and Junior Daughters is critical and crucial for the growth of the Catholic Church in the African American community.

In today’s Gospel the crowds who witnessed and were fed by Jesus’ multiplication of the five barley loaves and two fish boarded boats to track Jesus down. When they found him they asked him “What can we do to accomplish the works of God?”

What can we do? And Jesus answered them “This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.” This is the work of God, believe in the one he sent. We ask Jesus that same question today. What must we do to accomplish the works of God? And Jesus gives us the same answer. “Believe in the one he sent. Believe in the one he sent.” The Church exists to help us believe in the one God sent. The parish to which we belong, exists to help us believe in the one God sent.

Each Sunday morning we gather as God’s Church family to be fed on God’s word in Sacred Scripture and to be nourished by his Body and Blood in the Eucharist so that we may believe more deeply in the one God sent. Our sins are forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation so that we may believe more deeply in the one God sent. We join organizations like the Knights of Peter Claver, the Ladies Auxiliary, the Junior Knights and Junior Daughters, the Sodality, the Holy Name Society or any other parish organization or ministry so that our faith in the one God sent may be strengthened, deepened and renewed.

Unfortunately sometimes we would rather settle for the status quo. We would rather not be called or sent or challenged to deepen our faith. Like the Israelites in today first reading from the Book of Exodus, we grumble, whine and complain and may be we even say we were better off in slavery than in this wretched place. How sad. How ungrateful. How pitiful. We look for all kinds of excuses not to believe in the one God sent, not to go where God asks us to go, not to do what God is asking us to do as in this little conversation between God and one of his disciples entitled “And the Lord said Go.” And we like the Israelites we sigh and say each day “Here I am, send me.

How poorer the Church would be if the seven founders of the Knights of Peter Claver said “Oh it’s too difficult to establish such an organization”. Or if they said “Men won’t join us.” Or “We don’t have the time, or energy or money to do this.” How poorer our lives would be if they gave into grumbling, complaining and whining and did not do what God was calling them to do. “This is the work of God.” “Believe in the one God sent.”

These are the works of God we are called to do. This is how we deepen our faith in the one God sent in the person of Jesus Christ. This is the mission and mandate of the Knights of Peter Claver. Will it be easy? Certainly not. Will we at times be discouraged and distressed? Certainly, yes. Is it worth it? Absolutely.

The challenges facing our Church and nation are many. Respect for all human life from the moment of conception to natural death, the protection of marriage and family life, unemployment and underemployment, immigration, a housing mortgage crisis, health care, education, drug addiction, gang violence to name just a few. We could go on and on listing the problems and challenges.

But the bottom line is this “We believe that God is with us. God is on our side. The spirit of the Risen Christ abides within our Church and within each and every one

of us. So we need not be afraid. Our noble order will face the next 100 years with faith-filled confidence and the blessed assurance that “We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord, trusting in his holy Word. He’s never failed us yet.

St. Peter Claver, patron of our noble order. Pray for us. Amen.