

2024 Religious Education Congress
Opening Ceremony Address
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I. We are loved no matter what.

“God looked at everything God had made and was very pleased” (Genesis 1:31). When we pay attention to a beautiful sunset, stand before the immensity of the ocean, notice the beauty of a flower, or hold the miracle of life in a new born baby, we can be drawn into awe. We, too, can be in awe of our own lives. We are God’s loved ones, this is our identity because God is Love. We can begin this weekend with the same certainty that Jesus had when he emerged from the baptismal waters of the Jordan. A voice came from heaven saying: “You are my Beloved Son” (Mark 1:11). Jesus never forgot this intimate knowledge and blessing: the name *Beloved* was imprinted in his heart.¹

Pope Francis says that the real truth of life is that we are loved.² We all need the certainty that we are loved: bishops and priests, fully professed sisters and novices, doctors and patients, teachers and students, catechists and candidates, parents, and children. We need the affirmation of being unconditionally loved no matter what age or knowledge we have.

In Latin, to bless is *benedicere*, which literally means speaking (dictio) well (bene) or saying good things of someone. We need to hear good things said to us. Without affirmation, it is hard to well. To hear the voice of God in our hearts saying: “you are my beloved son”/“you are my beloved daughter” is more than a word of appreciation. This is God’s blessing to each one of us! Henry Nouwen says that to trust we are God’s beloved children is to say “yes” to our Belovedness.³

La invitación de este fin de semana es entrar con el mismo íntimo conocimiento y bendición que Jesús tuvo impreso en su corazón: “Tu eres mi hijo amado.” Esta es la bendición que Dios pronuncia hoy sobre tu vida. El Papa Francisco nos dice que la verdad de nuestra vida es que somos incondicionalmente amados sin importar la edad o el conocimiento que hemos acumulado. Es necesario vivir con la certeza de que somos amados/amadas independientemente de los sentimientos y circunstancias que experimentamos día a día. La certeza de nuestra vida es que somos hijos amados/amadas por Dios pase lo que pase.

To be loved is the deepest affirmation of our true self. We need the ongoing certainty that we belong to a loving God who will never abandon us, and will remind us always that we are

¹ Jan Richardson, *The Painted Prayer Book: Entering the Mysteries of Word, Image and Faith*, <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/02/11/lent-1-beloved-is-where-we-begin/>.

² Pope Francis, *Holy Mass and Canonization of The Blesseds*, May 15, 2022.

³ Henry Nouwen, *The Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York, N.Y: The Crossroad Publishing Company), 2002.

guided by love at every step of the way. However, we can be moody! One day we feel great and full of new ideas, the next we feel miserable, bored, and even a little request seems like too much. On good days, we are mature and open to criticism, on others, we are hypersensitive and feel threatened. These mood swings are signs we no longer perceive that we are loved. When we are tossed by the waves of our feelings and circumstances, we become victims of our world, but, when we continue to search for the gentle voice that gives us assurance, we can walk through life with a stable sense of well-being, true belonging, and certainty that we are loved no matter what...

II. Obstacles we put up to being loved by God.

The love of God cannot be stopped. The feeling of being loved is not the feeling that we generally have about ourselves. We all have lived many difficult moments in life, many moments we feel ignored or forgotten rather than loved. Moreover, we can feel like victims of a world we cannot change, and the daily news doesn't help much in coping with that feeling. Look at all the poverty, injustice, war, polarization, our daily struggles with relationships, our work, our health, and our ministries.... We might ask, "where is the blessing? Where is my certainty of being loved?" If to be loved is not just a sentiment, but a truth that shapes our lives, we must be able to see and experience God's blessing in a tangible way. The problem is that we place obstacles in the way of recognizing, receiving, and acknowledging the very love of God that does exist.⁴

For example, it is a challenge to let go of the belief that God demands us to measure up to God's high expectations. We might feel that if we fail to measure up, God will express disappointment and disapproval. One of my friends had very demanding parents. She needed to have good grades and be good at sports, and it was difficult for her to get permission to spend time with friends. She was always afraid of not meeting the expectations of her parents and she projected this onto God. One day she told me, "I don't feel God loves me freely without conditions. Maybe God is disappointed with me." Gregory Boyle says quote, "God is too busy loving you to have any time left over to be disappointed" (end of quote).⁵

El amor de Dios no lo podemos parar. Todos vivimos momentos difíciles en la vida y muchas veces nos sentimos olvidados en lugar de amados y nos preguntamos, ¿dónde está la bendición de Dios? El problema no es que no somos amados por Dios, pero los obstáculos que ponemos para reconocer y recibir Su amor. Por ejemplo, muchas veces sentimos que no podemos llegar a las altas expectativas de Dios y que lo decepcionamos, o que nunca seremos dignos de recibir su amor por más que nos esforcemos en hacer el bien. También nuestras heridas en el amor causadas a lo mejor por personas muy cercanas a nosotros nos hacen creer que el amor de Dios es también limitado y condicional.

⁴ Cf. Nouwen, *The Life of the Beloved*.

⁵ Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York, N.Y: Simon & Schuster), 2017.

En un retiro de matrimonios que ofrecimos en mi comunidad, uno de los señores compartió que había crecido con su padrastro y el de niño un día corrió diciéndole: papi, papi para darle un abrazo. El padrastro le dijo: “no me digas papi que no soy tu papá.” Esta experiencia le había marcado de por vida, pero en ese retiro le pudo decir papá a Dios y abrazarlo en su corazón sin temor. Hoy Dios te dice: ¡recuerda cuánto te amo!

Another obstacle is the false belief that we must become worthy before we are loved. In reality, we are never worthy nor never will be! “Being worthy” is not the point of our faith! God’s love is completely unearned. Our society is structured upon the supposition that we earn our worth. This is something that I constantly need to unlearn. The responsibilities I have and ministry I do are not what give meaning to my vocation and consecration. Rather, the meaning comes when I allow myself to be loved by God. Pope Francis says quote, “Our Christian lives begin not with doctrine and good works, but with the amazement born of realizing that we are loved, prior to any response on our part. By over-emphasizing our efforts to do good works, we have created an ideal of holiness excessively based on ourselves... to achieve a reward” (end of quote).⁶

Moreover, because of our personal woundedness, we might not believe we are loved. We could be carrying in our hearts painful experiences with close relationships: parents, caregivers, partners, or friends. We project our negative experiences onto God. Because we have experienced the limitations of human love, we might believe God’s love is also conditional. Painful experiences with relationships can also generate strong emotions, self-rejection, and even self-hatred. We are not defined by what others think nor what we think about ourselves. We are not what we do or what we have.

A Jewish tradition called *bar mitz-vah* (for boys) and *bat mitz-vah* (for girls) is when someone, who is thirteen years old, passes to adulthood and commits to living the Jewish law. Before the congregation, the parents say a blessing: "My child, whatever will happen to you in your life, whether you will have success or not, become important or not, will be healthy or not, always remember how much your mother and I love you." This is what God tells each of us today: “remember how much I love you.”

III. Claim and reclaim your primal identity as beloved child of God.

The love of God is the force that transforms our lives: it opens our hearts and empowers us to love. We can love only because God has loved us first. But, we must be present to God’s love and be willing to receive it. God doesn’t force Godself on us. Rather, the love of God is a gentle voice of beauty who draws us back into life.

Dios nunca va a imponer su amor en nosotros, y nunca se cansará de que lo podamos percibir. Dejarse amar es un aprendizaje de por vida. No es suficiente experimentar el amor de Dios solo una vez. Tenemos el reto de hacer una opción de dejarnos amar cada día y de poder amar con

⁶ Pope Francis, *Holy Mass and Canonization of The Blessed*, May 15, 2022.

su mismo amor. El ser conscientes de que somos amados no nos libera del sufrimiento o las caídas, pero nos da paz y alegría en medio de la no certeza. La invitación es amar con el mismo amor que somos amados. Teresita de Lisieux nos recuerda que amar al otro no es en grandes actos heroicos, pero en los pequeños detalles del día a día y nos anima a amar ya que para eso están hechos nuestros corazones.

To be loved is a journey of life. It is not enough to perceive God's love only once. The invitation and challenge are to choose this incredible truth of being a beloved child of God every day. The awareness of being loved won't free us from fear, risk or falling, but it will give us the certainty of not walking alone, of finding rest, joy, and peace during uncertainty.⁷ To claim our belovedness is critical.⁸ Not claiming it will lead us into pessimism. Each day we have a choice: to accept, or not, the invitation to love with the same love we receive from God.

St. Theresa of Lisieux reminds us that "To love others does not consist of heroic actions, but of many small acts of daily love."⁹ Are you a catechist or teacher? Then, love each of your students and families. Are you married or called to consecrated life? Then, love in your commitment with joy. Are you a parent or grandparent? Patiently love the reality of your family. Do you work for a living or work in a position of authority? Work with integrity in service of your brothers and sisters, fighting for justice and the common good.¹⁰ Theresa of Lisieux encourages us to love "since that is what our hearts were made for."¹¹

May we say yes to our Belovedness. May God's love bless us to be the love that offers life and hope to our families, society, and Church.

We would like you to send one another with God's blessing imprinted in your hearts. I invite you to turn to your neighbor and, according to your comfort level, either trace a cross on the forehead or simply extend your hand over the head, and say the blessing: you are a beloved child of God.

Nos gustaría enviarlos con la bendición de Dios impresa en su corazón. Te invito a que voltees con la persona que está a tu lado y, según te sientas más seguro, le traces una cruz en la frente o simplemente extiendas la mano sobre la cabeza, y pronuncies la bendición: eres un hijo/hija amada de Dios.

⁷ Cf. Richardson, *The Painted Prayer Book*.

⁸ Cf. Nouwen, *The Life of the Beloved*.

⁹ Saint Theresa of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of The Little Flower* (Charlotte, NC: Ten Classics), 2010.

¹⁰ Cf. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 14.

¹¹ Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*.

Beloved Is Where We Begin

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.

—Jan Richardson