

Homily for Religious Education Conference Mass

Celebrated by Archbishop Henryk M Jagodziński - Papal Nuncio

Homily Bishop S. Sipuka

Jonah 1:1-2:1,11

Responsorial Psalm Jonah 2:3-5,8

Luke 10:25-27

My dear brothers and sisters, fellow educators in Christ's mission,

The readings today speak powerfully to us gathered here for this conference on Religious Education. In Jonah, we see a prophet who receives a clear call from God - "Go to Nineveh" - and his immediate response is to run in the opposite direction. He boards a ship heading to Tarshish, as far from Nineveh as he can get.

Why does Jonah flee? The text doesn't explicitly state this, but we can infer it. Perhaps he felt inadequate for such a daunting mission. Perhaps he was afraid of failure. Perhaps he looked at the people of Nineveh - foreigners, sinners, people he didn't like - and thought, "Why should I bother? They won't listen anyway." Perhaps he simply wanted an easier life.

How many of us have felt like Jonah? God calls us to the sacred work of Religious Education, and sometimes we want to flee. We look at our students - some disinterested, some hostile to faith, some coming from homes where religion is mocked - and we think, "What's the point? They won't listen anyway." We feel inadequate. We're exhausted. We wonder if we're making any difference at all.

And sometimes the challenges are even more serious. I have seen on social media videos of learners insulting and even beating their teachers. This is the harsh reality some of you face. The work of teaching, especially in Religious Education, can be not only discouraging but also actually dangerous. When Jonah fled, he had good reason to be afraid. And when we feel like fleeing, we too may have good reasons.

But notice what happens to Jonah. He cannot escape his calling. Even in the belly of the fish, in the depths of the sea, in the place of death itself, God is there. And from that desperate place, Jonah prays. He cries out to God. And God hears him.

The Responsorial Psalm we just prayed is Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish: "Out of my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me." Even when Jonah had run away, even when he had failed, even when all seemed lost - God was still there, still listening, still ready to save.

This is the first truth we must remember as religious educators: **We do not work alone.** When we feel overwhelmed and like we're drowning in the demands and challenges of this ministry, we can cry out to God from our own depths, and He will hear us. Our calling does not depend on our strength but on God's faithfulness.

Then we come to the Gospel. The scholar asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus turns the question back to him: "What is written in the law?" The scholar answers with what we call the Great Commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself."

And Jesus says: "Do this and you will live."

This is the heart of all Religious Education. Not complicated theology. Not endless rules and regulations. Not preparing students to pass exams. The heart of everything we teach is this: **Love God. Love your neighbour.** This is the essence of our call; everything else that we do is a means to this act of loving God and neighbour.

Everything else - all our lessons about the sacraments, Church history, moral teaching, Scripture - all of it must lead to this. We are teaching our students how to love. How to love God with their whole being. How to love their neighbours - including the difficult neighbours, the different neighbours, the neighbours they don't understand. In our lives, we are surrounded by people we did not choose, and several of them we do not like, but we cannot murder them; we must live with them. They are our neighbours put with us by God. There is no dustbin for human beings.

This brings Jonah and the Gospel together in a beautiful way. Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh because he didn't love the people of Nineveh. He didn't see them as neighbours

worth saving. But God did. God loved them. And God was determined to give them a chance to turn back to Him.

In our Religious Education, we encounter students we might be tempted to write off. The student who mocks faith. The one questioning their identity. The one from another church who challenges Catholic teaching. The one who seems completely uninterested. The one who is difficult, disruptive, and different.

But the Great Commandment calls us to love them all - not with a vague, sentimental love, but with the love that serves, that is sacrificial, that loves even when it is not nice to love, that listens, that respects their dignity as children of God, that walks patiently with them even when progress seems impossible.

This is hard work. It's Jonah's work - being sent to people who may not want to hear the message. But it's also resurrection work - believing that even from the depths, even from what appears to be death, God can bring new life.

So what does this mean practically for us this week, as we continue this conference and return to our schools?

First, **when you feel like fleeing, pray**. Like Jonah in the fish, cry out to God from wherever you are. He will hear you.

Second, **remember the heart of your mission**: teaching students to love God and love their neighbours. When you feel overwhelmed by curriculum demands and exam pressure, return to this simple centre. Everything else is just the means to this end.

Third, **trust that God is at work even when you cannot see it**. Jonah couldn't see from inside the fish that God had a plan. You may not see the fruits of your labour now. But you are planting seeds. God will bring the growth.

Finally, **know that you are doing God's work**. Not because you are perfect, not because you have all the answers, but because God has called you to your school, just as He called Jonah,

do not wish to be another school; God has placed you there for a purpose, fulfil it. Like Jonah, you may sometimes fail, sometimes run away, sometimes find yourself in the depths. But God remains faithful. God will bring you through. And through you, God will reach the hearts of young people who desperately need to hear that they are loved.

Do this: love God, love your students, and you will live.

Amen.