

Dear Fathers, Religious Sisters, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Good afternoon!

As the representative of Pope Benedict XVI, it is my honor and joy to greet you in the name of the Holy Father. We see in the life of St Madeline Sophie Barat that she was close to the pope, so it is not inappropriate to invite the pope's representative to celebrate the opening Mass of this important meeting of the great family of educational institutions inspired by St Madeline Sophie Barat.

Let us turn to the Scriptures for today's Mass.

Jesus often illustrates his teaching with familiar things everyone can immediately understand. In *John 15*, Jesus uses the image of the vine and the branches to teach us that **we must abide in him, we must submit to pruning, and we must bear fruit**. Each one of us here can see ourselves in these images. And what applies to us can also be extended to each one of your schools and institutions. Are we dry branches, or are we fruitful?

1. We must abide in Jesus. Jesus says, *"Make your home in me, as I make mine in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me."* Jesus says: *"Cut off from me, you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is like a branch that has been thrown away and withers. These branches are collected and they are thrown on the fire and burnt."*

Jesus has made his home in us. All of us are invited to live in Jesus. Jesus says, *"I am true vine."* Jesus is our source of life. As long as we remain in him, we stay alive. Apart from Jesus, when we do not remain in Jesus, we begin the process of death. This is true for each of us and for each of our schools.

2. We must submit to pruning. God will need to prune. Pruning is not a hostile act to the branch. Pruning is done for several reasons. For example, growth needs to be disciplined and directed. If a branch is not pruned, the strength of the vine is wasted, it will bear perhaps more bunches than it should, with the consequence that not all will ripen and that the rating of the wine will be lower. If it remains a long time without being pruned, the vine even becomes wild and produces only vine tendrils and wild grapes.

Apart from Christian considerations, this process can be seen in human life. To live is to choose, and to choose is to deny oneself. The person who wants to do too many things in life, or cultivates innumerable interests and hobbies, is dispersed, and will not be outstanding in anything.

One must have the courage to make choices, to put some secondary interests to one side to concentrate on the primary. To prune!

All of this is even truer on a spiritual level in the lives of Christians.

God will prune us in order to discipline and direct spiritual growth. We stand before God with open hands. God will put persons, situations and things into our lives and God will take persons, situations or things out of our life in order to bring discipline or in order to better direct our spiritual growth.

There is an illustration of this from the world of art. Holiness is like sculpture. Leonardo da Vinci defined sculpture as "the art of removing." The other arts consist in adding something: color to the canvas in painting, stone on stone in architecture, note after note in music.

Only sculpture consists of removing, of taking away the pieces of marble that are in excess, so that the figure can emerge that the sculptor has in mind. Christian perfection is also obtained like this, by removing everything that keeps us from growing closer to God, namely, sin – but also desires, ambitions, projects, carnal tendencies and everything that disperses us and does not let us finish anything.

One day, Michelangelo walking through a garden in Florence saw a block of marble in a corner protruding from the earth, half covered by grass and mud.

He stopped suddenly, as if he had seen someone, and turning to friends, who were with him, exclaimed: "An angel is imprisoned in that marble; I must get him out." And, armed with a chisel, he began to work on that block until the figure of a beautiful angel emerged.

Maybe God also looks at us and sees us this way: as a block of stone. God then says to himself: "Therein is hidden a new and beautiful creature that waits to come out to the light; more than that, the image of my own son Jesus Christ is hidden there, I want to bring it out!" We are predestined to "be conformed to the image of his son" (*Romans* 8:29).

Then, what does He do? He takes the chisel and begins to work on us. He takes the pruning shears and begins to prune us. God does not prune in order to make us suffer. God prunes for a good purpose. Which brings me to my third and last point.

3. We must bear fruit. God expects us to bear fruit for his glory. Ultimately, pruning helps a plant to become healthier so that it can bear more and better fruit. God also expects each one of us to bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). God – and the Church – expects our institutions to be fruitful as well.