Fr Matthew Charlesworth, SJ
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Memorial of St. Cornelius, pope and martyr, and St. Cyprian, bishop and martyr

Date: Tuesday, September 16, 2025 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: 1 Timothy 3:1–13
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 101:1b–3b, 5–6 | **Response:** Psalm 101:2
Gospel Acclamation: Luke 7:16
Gospel Reading: Luke 7:11–17
Preached at: the Chapel of Emmaus House **in the** Archdiocese of Harare, Zimbabwe**.**

The readings today are about the kind of leadership that guards the Gospel, the mercy that restores life, and the faith that stands unshaken even in the face of death. They bring before us the quiet dignity of service in the Church, the steadfast love of God for His people, and the call to see in every human face the image of Christ. And on this feast of Saints Cornelius and Cyprian, two shepherds who laid down their lives for the flock, they ask us to hold together courage and compassion, truth and tenderness.

Saint Paul, writing to Timothy in the first reading, sketches the portrait of a leader in the household of God. It is not a job description brimming with managerial skills; it is a moral portrait, a list of virtues that shape the soul before they ever touch the hands. The bishop must be above reproach, temperate, hospitable, gentle; the deacon must be dignified, faithful, tested. In the early Church this was more than administrative necessity—it was survival. A community under pressure, living in the shadow of persecution, could not afford leaders whose hearts were divided. The Greek word episkopos, meaning "overseer," would have called to mind not a bureaucrat, but a watchman on the city wall—eyes scanning the horizon for danger, ears tuned to the stirrings of the Spirit. Even here there are hints—gynaikas in verse 11—that women may have served as deacons, bearing witness to the radical inclusivity of the Gospel in its earliest breath.

The psalm responds like an oath taken at dawn: "I will walk with blameless heart." It is the prayer of a leader who knows that the authority to serve comes not from title or position but from integrity of life. The psalmist promises to

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keep no place for deceit, to shun arrogance, to seek the faithful of the land. It is a psalm that refuses the easy temptation of ruling from afar; it speaks of walking in the midst of the people, with eyes and heart set on God's way.

Then comes the Gospel, and here leadership is no longer a list of virtues—it is a heart moved to tears. Jesus meets a funeral procession outside the gates of Nain. The widow's son is dead; her future has died with him. The cultural weight of this is heavy: in first-century Palestine, a widow without a son was left without protection, income, or voice. She is doubly invisible—by gender and now by grief. But Jesus sees her. Not her status. Not her social worth. Her. And "his heart went out to her." The Greek verb here is visceral—it means to be moved in one's gut. Leadership in the kingdom of God begins there, in that gut-deep compassion that refuses to let death have the last word.

Saints Cornelius and Cyprian understood this. Cornelius, Pope, faced fierce division in the Church over how to treat those who had lapsed under persecution; he stood for mercy over exclusion, reconciliation over revenge. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, shared that vision, even as plague ravaged the city, calling Christians to care not only for their own but for pagans too. They remind us that the authority of the Church rests not on the ability to enforce, but on the courage to embrace—especially those whom the world would cast away.

In Zimbabwe today, the question of leadership and compassion is not abstract. We see widows in our villages who struggle to feed their children because land rights are denied them; we see young people whose education is stifled by corruption or poverty; we see communities fractured by mistrust. The readings invite us to imagine leadership that listens before it speaks, that walks into the dust and noise of real life, that risks proximity to pain. Catholic Social Teaching tells us that dignity is not a privilege earned but a gift given by God, and so the work of the Church—your work, our work—is to make that dignity visible, tangible, undeniable.

Ignatius would ask us to pray by placing ourselves in that Gospel scene—feel the heat of the midday sun, hear the shuffle of feet on the dry earth, see the tears of the widow. Stand beside Jesus as He stops the procession. Watch His eyes as they rest on hers. Hear Him say, "Do not weep." In that moment, ask: where in my life is Christ calling me to stop, to see, to restore life?

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The unifying image is the gate. In Nain, the miracle happened at the city gate—the threshold where life and death met, where the procession of grief collided with the Lord of life. Each of us stands at gates every day—moments where we can either pass by untouched or stop and speak the word that brings hope. Cornelius and Cyprian stood at such gates and chose life, knowing it would cost them their own.

So, brothers and sisters, let us lead—whether in the pulpit, the classroom, the family, the street—like those who have been moved in the gut by Christ Himself. Let us be watchmen on the walls, yes, but also companions on the road, crossing every threshold with eyes open for the widow, the orphan, the forgotten. For at every gate where compassion meets courage, Christ passes by.

This week, let us ponder:

- Where is Christ inviting me to "stop at the gate" and truly see someone I might otherwise overlook?
- How am I being called to lead—not by authority or title—but by integrity, humility, and mercy?
- In the light of Cornelius and Cyprian's witness, what risks am I willing to take so that others may know the life Christ brings?

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In preparing this homily, I consulted various resources to deepen my understanding of today's readings, including using Magisterium AI for assistance. The final content remains the responsibility of the author.