

National Catholic Prayer Breakfast – May 13, 2014

It is a great joy to be with you here today at this Prayer Breakfast. They tell us breakfast is the most important meal. That could not be any truer than here, as we gather as believers to celebrate our faith and share a meal on this Feast of Our Lady of Fatima, whose constant message is prayer and conversion.

I am happy to bring you the warmest greetings of Pope Francis. I told him about today's event. I am sure that if Pope Francis were here he would urge us to renew the missionary spirit of our Church as we carry the glad tidings of the Gospel to the periphery. Sometimes the periphery can mean Harvard, Yale, Wall Street or even in this hotel where President Reagan was shot, a block from my old parish.

Washington is the place where I spent the longest period of my life, and I have many great memories. One incident I shall never forget involves Wilbur Mills, a long-time speaker in the House and a one-time presidential candidate. Mills was involved in a traffic incident here in Washington in 1974, at that time I was a young priest working in local parishes here. His car was stopped by US Park Police late at night because the car's

headlights were out. Mills was intoxicated and his face was injured from a scuffle with Annabella Battistella, professionally known as Fannie Fox, the Argentine firecracker. In an attempt to escape, they both leapt from the car and jumped into the nearby Tidal Basin.

One month later, Mills was to be on the ballot in his home state of Arkansas for re-election to Congress. While his office denied that he had a drinking problem, Jack Anderson reported that if his staff said, “He can’t speak with you now, he’s on the floor”, it was never clear if Mills was on the floor of the House or the floor of his office. In the next election, a month after the scandal, the Mill challenger used the slogan: “If you like liquor, sex and thrills, cast your vote for Wilbur Mills.”

Mills won handily with 60% of the votes. He had asked for forgiveness from his constituencies and explained to them that his problems were a result of cavorting with foreigners.

For 20 years I was here in Washington cavorting with foreigners working at the *Centro Catolico Hispano*, the Spanish Catholic Center. I did not find this to be a corrupting influence on my life, but rather an uplifting experience and indeed a great privilege. Coming from a lace curtain Irish community in the

Midwest, being thrust into the challenges and sufferings of the immigrant community was truly an eye-opener.

Most of my parishioners were undocumented workers, refugees from the wars in Central America. They were not evil invaders but people seeking to feed and clothe their families in safety, much like the immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Germany and Poland. If they broke the law to come to this country, they were like Jean Val Jean. The solution is not to punish them but to initiate new and more just laws to replace a system that is broken and woefully inadequate. Pope Francis' presence at Lampedusa was a clarion call to reject the attitude of indifference to the plight of immigrants.

My twenty years in this city was the honeymoon of my priesthood and religious life. At the Centro Catolico we received thousands of immigrants from Latin America, and occasionally we would have people from other countries. On a Friday afternoon, as government offices were about to close, I received a call from someone in the State Department saying they had a diplomat seeking political asylum, had nowhere to put him and wondered if we could take care of him. A young man in a three piece suit carrying a fine leather briefcase and

speaking perfect English presented himself. He was a Romanian economist on a diplomatic mission to the World Bank. I asked him what led him to make the drastic decision to renounce the possibility to ever return to his country. He told me that his superiors told him to stop going to Church and he said he could not live without the Eucharist. I asked if there were still many believers after so much persecution. He told me that in his country, as in so many eastern European countries, it was the custom during the 40 days after Easter to greet people by saying: “Christ is Risen”, and the reply was “He is truly Risen”. He told me that often in the central offices of the government in Bucharest in those days of the Easter season you could hear the people greeting each other, “The Comrade has returned”, and the reply, “He is truly back”. Well we are here today because the comrade is truly back. He is alive and His life and love sustain us.

My experience as a priest with the immigrant community here in Washington was a great joy. Those were very interesting days to be a Catholic and to be in Washington DC. There was an active Catholic Worker group here, Nellie Gray was organizing the March for Life, there were many organizations

with outreach to Latin America, and the peace movement was flourishing. There was a strong alliance with Rev. Martin Luther King's struggle for racial justice, and there was great interest in the social Gospel of the Church.

Prior to coming to Washington, when I was in the seminary, our Provincial, Father Victor, wrote a letter to Rome in which he said that the Capuchin's mission in Puerto Rico was flourishing and that our Province was prepared to take on a second mission. He said that he wanted the most difficult mission in the world. The response was lightening quick, saying that we should open a mission in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. The Guardian, Father Fermin Schmidt, from the Capuchin College in Washington, was named the first Bishop and friars were sent, including three of my classmates.

Many years later, a young friar I ordained who was working in Papua New Guinea came to see me on his home visit. He had glorious pictures of smiling natives, with bones in their noses, feathers in their hair and little else in the way of clothing. He announced proudly, "This is my parish council." I was particularly intrigued because one of my own pastors had

just told me that his parishioners were not ready for a parish council.

If Fr. Provincial wrote today asking for the most difficult mission, we might have been sent not to Papua, New Guinea, but to the United States and other places in the Western World where secularism and dechristianization are gaining ground. These are the new mission territories for the Church.

We need to find new ways of bringing the Gospel to the contemporary world, of proclaiming Christ anew and of implanting the faith. Our task is to turn consumers into disciples and disciple-makers. We need to prepare men and women who witness to the faith, and not send people into the witness protection program. As the U.S. Bishops wrote in *Go Make Disciples*: “Every Catholic can be a minister of welcome, reconciliation, and understanding to those who have stopped practicing the faith.” Pope Francis speaks of the culture of encounter and the art of accompaniment.

As we go forward with the work of the Church in the 21st century, business as usual is not enough. We must move from a maintenance mode to a missionary one. We must ask ourselves,

‘What does it mean to live in a culture of unbelief; a culture which does not even know it does not believe because it still lives on the residue of Christian civilization?’ The mission of the Church is about making disciples, helping people respond to the call to holiness and be faithful to the Gospel. Discipleship is about living with Christ, in a faith community striving to follow His teaching and example and then to pass on the faith.

This is not something new in the history of the Church. We have been doing this for two thousand years. One of the first attempts is documented in a stunning book from the first century. It is called the Didache which means “training.” It is the first training manual for initiating people into the life of the Church.

The Didache shows us that for the Church teaching the faith is always a process of mentoring. Then as now, we are not transmitting our own theories or notions, but speaking and hopefully witnessing the word of God; the word of life is not to be received as mere information. The mentor was expected to illustrate, inquire, question, listen and challenge his candidate in such ways that not only the words, but the deeper meaning of

the Way of Life were being suitably assimilated at every step. The Didache also tries to prepare its novices for the rejection by their friends, relatives and even by a dominant culture which is hostile to the Gospel teachings.

In today's world Catholic education must be Didache, training in a way of life which is increasingly alien in the secular world, where our concern about unborn children or the sacredness of marriage makes us appear quaint and even nettlesome. We need mentors: parents, grandparents, Godparents, teachers, youth ministers, neighbors, who are ready to pass on the faith.

The amazing thing is that historically the Church was persecuted mostly for the truths that we taught concerning Christ and the Church. The controversies were Arianism, transubstantiation or papal infallibility. Today, the attacks directed at the Church are directed at our teaching concerning the dignity of the human person, the sacredness of life and the importance of marriage. The Church's commitment to teach the social Gospel and promote human development flows from our duty to proclaim the truth about the human person.

Our striving for the common good in society is simply a logical corollary of our love of neighbor. Unjust structures and oppressive political and economic systems result when ethics and virtue are banished from the public square as irrelevant to building a just and humane society.

We need to equip our people to be disciples. They need to know the truths of our faith, but they need to know how to live those truths. The way most of us become real Christians is by looking over someone else's shoulder, emulating some admired older member of our family or parish, saying yes and taking up a way of life that was made real and accessible through the witness of someone else.

We live in a world obsessed by celebrities, a world where all too often celebrities have replaced heroes and heroines. Often times these celebrities, for all their good looks and talents in singing, acting or sports, lead lives that are superficial, self-absorbed and chaotic. In contrast, the Church has always held up for us the lives of the saints as examples of the universal call to holiness. The Saints model for us the struggle to overcome human weakness and sinfulness and embrace God's will in our lives.

In the life of Dorothy Day, we read how as a child, she experienced a terrible earthquake in her town in California. People were forced to live in tents for weeks because of the destruction of property and the aftershocks that followed the earthquake. What fascinated young Dorothy was to see how neighbors, who formerly did not even know each other's names, suddenly began to greet each other, were even sharing their food and water, taking care of the children and the elderly, and forming a true community. But when things returned to normal, the old indifference and individualism returned to their neighborhood. Dorothy Day's whole life was a quest to recapture that sense of community she had experienced after the earthquake. That quest led her into the Communist Party and eventually into the Catholic Church.

In 1932, already a Catholic, Dorothy Day went to Washington DC to cover a hunger march for the unemployed. During that time, she felt strongly her separation from her previous friends who were protesting under the socialist banner. Dorothy Day went into the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception here in Washington on December 8 and spent the morning in prayer, asking God to help her find a way to integrate her newly

found Catholic faith with her concern for the poor. When she returned to New York, Peter Maurin was waiting for her; and that friendship transformed her life.

As a young seminarian here in Washington, I knew Dorothy Day, however, I never had the opportunity to meet Peter Maurin. I was involved with the Catholic worker here and the writings of Peter Maurin inspired me as a seminarian. He was an eccentric, French peasant who had been a lay brother. He was a man in love with Christ in the social message of the Gospel. Peter's philosophy was not to denounce, but announce. Dorothy once wrote: "He made you feel that you and all men had great and generous hearts with which to love God; he made you feel a sense of mission."

It is good for people to hear about our saints and contemporary heroes like Dorothy Day, who after having an abortion and another child out of wedlock, became one of the most outstanding persons in the history of the Church in our country. One of the worst effects of the scandals in the Church in the contemporary era is a cynicism about the call to holiness. People can be overwhelmed by the bad example of priests and bishops who failed to fulfill their calling. We need to remind

people that there have always been saints and sinners in the Church. The Church's task is to call everyone to conversion. We all have our successes and our failures. We are all struggling on the same path to holiness.

We must also break the bad habit of presenting the Church in such a way that people are deceived into thinking that they can be Christians and remain strangers. The privatization of religion in today's climate of new age individualism is poisonous to the Gospel message of community, of connectedness in the Body of Christ.

There can be no Catholic life, no holiness, no discipleship without prayer and the sacraments. It is when the worshipping community gathers around the altar that we recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread and where, by partaking of the Eucharist, we become one with Christ and with each other.

We all need to discover more deeply our vocation to live the Gospel teachings, to put others first and seek the last place, to be close to Jesus who came to serve and not to be served. Love and justice must motivate us to work for a transformation of our own heart so that we can transform the world around us. This is the message of Pope Francis.

Among the first Christians, their sense of the presence of the Risen Lord was so strong that they gladly shared their possessions so that no one would be in want. They initiated the diaconate to overcome ethnic divisions. They took care of widows and orphans and rejected the Roman practice of abortion and infanticide. And Paul in his letter to Philemon states that Onesimus is a slave no longer, but rather a brother. Living out the Gospel always calls people to announce the kingdom and live the values of the kingdom here and now and in so doing to renew society by bringing the light of God's love and truth into the world. Together, let us go forth with this sacred mission. The Comrade has returned. The Risen Lord is back to gather the scattered, to put the Gospel of joy in our hearts.