



Forming disciples for the third millennium

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Mile Hi Congress, 1999

I.

In organizing my thoughts for today, I came across an article in the February 21 *New York Times*. I'd like to share it with you, because it offers a good context for our discussion this morning. It's entitled, "The Far Right Sees the Dawn of the Moral Minority," and it talks about the anger and despair felt by many Washington conservatives in the wake of President Clinton's impeachment acquittal.

Here's a sampling.

William Bennett, the former secretary of education, is quoted as claiming that ordinary Americans "are complicit in [the president's] corruption."

Sen. Paul Smith of New Hampshire says that "the president's acquittal is a sad commentary on the prevailing values in America."

And Paul Weyrich, the man who invented the name *Moral Majority* for Jerry Falwell's crusading organization, is even more bleak. "I no longer believe that there *is* a moral majority," he says, and "I do not believe that a majority of Americans actually shares our values." Mr. Weyrich goes on to warn that ". . . we have to look at what we can do to *separate* ourselves from this hostile culture" because we have "probably lost the culture war."

Now, I didn't come here today to talk about politics, the president's sins or conservative bafflement with American voters. I can understand the frustration of these men, and *The New York Times* should be embarrassed for lumping them all together in the so-called far right. But I also don't share the alarm of these men — and I certainly don't believe that separating ourselves from current American culture would solve anything. On the contrary: It would make matters worse. We can not be leaven in society if we remove ourselves from the recipe.

The *Times* article is still useful, though, in one important way: It reminds us that traditional Christian faith — the kind of faith you and I were raised on — may be less and less of a force in our society in the decades ahead. Christians may in fact be the "moral minority" in the not so distant future. And that has very big implications for how we preach Jesus Christ and teach the Catholic faith. Fifty years ago, we could count on our culture reinforcing, or at least reflecting, our religious beliefs. We no longer have that luxury. And 50 years from now, the world will be even more drastically different.

Remember that last February, at this same Mile Hi Congress, we talked about how all of us — parents, priests, bishops and educators — share one vital role in the Church. We are teachers. That's our mandate as believers. Those are the exact words I used. I want to repeat them now, and underline them: *We are teachers.*

Like never before in American history, we need to be people rooted in the Church and faithful to her teachings. In an age of confusion, the Church is our only reliable guide. If today's political environment shows us anything, it's that public character and private virtue are disappearing from the vocabulary of civic life. And if the stock market continues to rise — if our economic success goes on indefinitely — it could stay that way. But human beings are better than that. Our children deserve more than that. And it's our job to form them in the truth which will make them genuinely free.

We can't do that apart from the Church. It's our job to be missionaries and witnesses of God's presence to our children; to our spouses; to our coworkers and friends; and to the elected officials who represent us through the ballot box. We haven't done that well enough, or we wouldn't find ourselves where we are today. *Either we form society, or society will form us.* The human heart needs to worship something. It's our deepest hunger. Either we will form our children as disciples of Jesus Christ, the Son of the *true* God. Or they will choose other gods to take His place — and the marketplace is full of them. This is why each one of us makes such a vital difference. The future depends on God. But God acts *through us* to touch the souls of our young people and the soul of the next century. That is what's at stake in our lifetimes.

II.

My theme this morning is "forming disciples for the third millennium," and, of course, we've already started into it through the back door of *The New York Times*. I'd like to talk briefly about three key ideas in my theme, and then we'll have time for questions and discussion.

Let's talk first about the idea of "forming." Forming is not the same as *informing*. It's not just a matter of providing choices to another person, and then standing back to see what happens. I'm a Capuchin Franciscan, and I was *formed* to think and feel, act and pray, in the spirit of my community, which is rooted in the life of St. Francis. I was molded. Spouses mold each other in the covenant of marriage, guided by God's grace. Friends form each other through the joys and sorrows of their friendship. And parents form their children through their encouragement and discipline. In every case, the *goal* is a deepening of communion, love, joy and maturity — but the *means to that end* can be experienced as pressure and suffering. Real love can sometimes feel like a hammer.

My point is that all formation involves a *shaping of the one who is formed*. It's an act of creation which also involves a kind of "healthy destruction" — the cleaning away of what's useless or unnecessary. Let me explain.

Most of us know C.S. Lewis as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Screwtape Letters*. But he was a teacher as well as a writer — and in his lectures, he often described God as a sculptor. For Lewis, the suffering in a person's life has a very special meaning, which is echoed again and again in Scripture.

Proverbs tells us, ". . . Do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of His reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom He loves, as a father the son in whom He delights" (3:11-12). And the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that in suffering, ". . . God is treating you as sons, for what son is there whom a father does not discipline?" (12:7).

And this is why the Letter of James tells us, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials . . ." (1:2). Suffering is a tool. God uses this tool to shape each of us into the saints He wants us to be. God sees the shape of our holiness in the marble of our humanity. Then He cuts away the stone of sin to free us.

It's a great metaphor. Anyone who's seen a photograph of Michelangelo's sculpture of the *Pieta* — or viewed it in person, up close at the Vatican — knows exactly what Lewis meant. The figures of Jesus and Mary have a detail and a humanity which are alive. The smoothness of the skin, the elegance of the limbs, the sorrow on Mary's face — these things are so real that you forget they came from a slab of dead marble. The sculptor saw the beauty in the stone . . . and he set it free with a hammer and a chisel. Nobody remembers the hammer blow; that was over in an instant. They're too moved by the beauty of the results. The beauty lasts forever.

Now, people aren't blocks of stone. They're living tissue, with the freedom and dignity of children of God. And teachers aren't chisels and hammers. Or at least they shouldn't be. They are active, cooperating agents in God's plan, not merely His instruments. But we can still draw some lessons from the sculptor and his work.

First, the great sculptor is motivated by love, not merely technical skill. The sculptor *loves* the beauty and the truth he sees locked in the stone. In the same way, the great teacher *loves* the possibilities for beauty and truth — the hint of the image of God — she sees in the face of her students.

Next, the great sculptor has a *passion for his work* and a *confidence in his vision*. In like manner, no Catholic teacher or parent can form another person in the faith without a passion for the Gospel, a personal zeal for Jesus Christ, and an absolute confidence in the truth of the Church and her teaching. *No teacher can give what she doesn't have herself*. If you yourself don't believe, then you can only communicate unbelief. If I'm not faithful myself, then I will only communicate infidelity. Who we are, is part of the formation we give to others.

Finally, we need to recognize that people, unlike marble, have free will which must be respected. A person can freely reject the Gospel. The person who forms another in the faith must rely, therefore, on persuasion and never coercion. At the same time, though, the teacher should never lose sight of the fact that *real* freedom, Gospel freedom, is a very different creature from secular ideas of liberty, and choice for choice's sake.

Real freedom emerges from self-sacrifice, not self-assertion. That's a radically counter-cultural message today. But of course, it's the truth. If we believe God created us for a purpose, then some choices lead to beauty, truth, dignity and joy. And others do not. Real freedom consists in conforming ourselves to God's plan. St. Paul reminds us that in our suffering and self-sacrifice, ". . . this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17). But it means letting God shape our lives, so that the beauty He sees in us emerges and shines. We don't have to allow this. But we should think carefully about the alternative.

Michelangelo could find the beauty in nearly any piece of marble. But he also left us a reminder of failure. Most of us know Michelangelo's wonderful sculpture of David. But he also produced a collection called "the Captives." The name is a kind of grim joke. Each piece of sculpture in "the Captives" collection is a crude, half-finished form of a person, roughly cut from the marble, whom the artist simply could not complete . . . because the marble would not surrender the shape. Whatever Michelangelo saw in those stones is still trapped in them today, unfinished. It's held captive by the marble, more than four centuries later. And that's our alternative to God's love. Persons who reject God, remain captive in their own stone — without beauty, without form, and without real freedom. *That's* why we help God shape those whom we love.

III.

"Go therefore, and *make disciples* of all nations." Those words from the Gospel of Matthew undergird this congress every year. But what does a disciple look like? What does a disciple do? Well, maybe we should start with what a disciple *doesn't* do.

A disciple doesn't merely *assent* to Jesus Christ, with this or that intellectual reservation, because Jesus is not an idea. A disciple doesn't *endorse the message* of Jesus Christ from the sidelines. A disciple doesn't *relativize* Jesus Christ as a First Century reformer who would have included this or that social issue in His agenda if He'd just had the benefit of 20th Century hindsight. A disciple doesn't merely *admire* Jesus Christ as a great teacher and prophet.

Jesus is so much more than all these things.

On the contrary, the disciple of Jesus Christ *loves and follows* Him. The disciple of Jesus Christ *accepts Him without reservation* as the Son of God. The disciple of Jesus Christ *submits and conforms* his or her whole life to the Gospel. The disciple of Jesus Christ *believes* that He is "the way, the truth and the life," the only redeemer, the only messiah, the only sure path to eternal joy. He is the savior; *there is no other*.

I could go on, but you get the point. Discipleship is not the equivalent of a club membership. Properly lived, it's sacrificial. In fact, it's all-absorbing . . . which is why real discipleship is so unpopular in contemporary American culture. It gets in the way of consumer self-indulgence. Discipleship is the total dedication to following Jesus Christ, preaching His Gospel and serving His Church.

In his recent apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*, the Holy Father says, “. . . the vital core of the new evangelization must be the clear and unequivocal proclamation of the person of Jesus Christ — that is, the preaching of His name, His teaching, His life, His promises and the kingdom He has gained for us by His paschal mystery.” That’s the apostolate we’ve chosen as Catholic educators. That’s the task we’re called to do. And the virtues it requires are simple but demanding: *trust* in the authority of Scripture and the teachings of the Catholic faith; *zeal* to spread the Good News of the cross; and *humility* to put aside our own agendas and submit our wills to the guidance of the Church.

To which I would add the following: To make and form disciples, we first need to be disciples ourselves. Nothing bears more fruit than personal witness. If we really believe, we will bring others to believe. In fact, in the words of John Paul II again, “The burning desire to invite others to encounter the One whom we have encountered, is the start of the evangelizing mission to which the whole Church is called.”

Do we have a desire that *burns* in us to bring others to Jesus? That’s strong but liberating language. And that evangelizing mission should target not just the hearts of others, but the structures of the society within which we live. As the Epistle of James reminds us, “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (2:17). This is why the American bishops called us so articulately to struggle on behalf of the unborn, the infirm and the terminally ill in their statement *Living the Gospel of Life* last November. Helen Alvare from the NCCB’s Secretariat for Pro-life Affairs will be speaking on this document tomorrow, and I encourage every one of you to attend her session, and read and pray over the bishops’ statement.

And when you do, read it in concert with the other outstanding document the bishops produced last November — *Everyday Christianity*. We have an obligation to live our faith in defense of human dignity, at both the beginning and the end of life. We *also* have the duty to carry Jesus Christ into the everyday rhythm of our work and civic environments. And that’s the message of *Everyday Christianity*. Discipleship is a call to action, not just an invitation to agreement. The maps to an active Christian discipleship already exist in documents like *Living the Gospel of Life* and *Everyday Christianity*. If we don’t use them, we won’t be forming anyone or anything — and we’ll have no one to blame but ourselves for the results.

IV.

As we go about our sessions today, we’re barely 10 months from the beginning of the Great Jubilee, the end of the century, and the turn of the Year 2000. That’s a little sobering. I think many of us tend to deal with the new millennium by not thinking very deeply about it. But the Holy Father has been preaching about it for 20 years, and of course that’s exactly what we should all be doing — thinking, preparing and praying deeply about the future. And that brings us to the final idea in our theme for this morning. What exactly does it mean to form disciples for *the third millennium*?

I have two answers, and both are true.

Here’s the first: Forming disciples for the third millennium is going to demand exactly the same missionary spirit and missionary skills it took for the *first* 2,000 years. The human predicament on January 1, 2000, will probably look pretty much the same as it did on January 1, 1990, and pretty much the same as it will on January 1, 2010.

There’s nothing secret or magic or frightening or radically new, or even particularly dramatic, about New Year’s Eve 1999 — unless you’re looking for an excuse to party. Or unless you believe in Jesus Christ as the center and meaning of history. God is still God. We’re still made of the same stone. And most people in the world have *still* not heard the Gospel preached to them.

For 70 percent of the people on this planet, the “new millennium” is no more than a convenient standard for measuring time. It has no religious content whatsoever. For me, that’s much more troubling than the hands on any clock. If the world does not know Jesus Christ, it’s because of us: *our* lack of missionary zeal, *our* lack of sacrifice, *our* lack of love. And that problem isn’t solved by new tools or new information. It’s solved by our own conversion and discipleship — which is pretty much the same story as every generation since the cross.

But we *are* entering an age which will have its own unique challenges, and this is my second answer — that we need to form disciples in the decades ahead who are prepared for a world drastically different from anything in American memory. Physics is changing the way we articulate the structure of the universe. Genetics is changing the way we articulate the structure of the human person. And in the midst of this accelerating power and knowledge, Western societies — many of them constituting the Christian world as we once knew it — are removing themselves from the future.

What I mean is this: In today's developed countries, one in seven persons has an age of 65 or older. But in 30 years, that number will grow to one in four. In other the words, over the next three decades, the percentage of older people in our population will *nearly double*.

Here are some other statistics: In 1950, the developed countries had about 24 percent of the world's population. By 2050, they will account for barely 10 percent. Over the next half century, more than 30 developed countries, from Austria, to Russia to Spain to the United Kingdom, will actually *lose population in real numbers*. The fertility rate in every developed country has already fallen below the replacement rate of 2.1. By 2050, the 12 most populous nations in the world will include only one of today's developed countries. That will be the United States, which will sustain its population on immigration. These data come from Peter Peterson's new book, *Gray Dawn* (Times Books), but they're widely available from other reliable sources as well.

The implications for people in the developed countries are pretty obvious. As lifespans increase and fertility drops, pension and healthcare expenses will go up. Unfortunately, the workforce supporting those expenses by taxes will shrink. Therefore, the tax burden on each younger worker will grow. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that euthanasia, to name just one example, will look more and more cost effective in the coming decades. At a minimum, friction between the old and the young in developed countries will increase. And it will have a huge impact on social welfare policies. Population growth in the less developed countries, meanwhile, is likely to continue. This is why governments like our own are forcing population control on the more fertile developing countries — it's now seen as a matter of urgent national security in many of the aging, industrialized states.

I mention these projections because the assumptions which we've made, for most of our lives, about the shape of the future . . . well, they're going to be wrong. Drastically wrong. The human story will remain the same, but the organizational terrain of human societies and institutions will not. And we can't avoid much of what's coming, both the good and the bad. If the entire developed world woke up from its death wish tomorrow and began restoring its fertility rate, it would take decades to have any effect. More importantly though, if a society has freely chosen *against* life, does it make any sense to mourn it? Beyond a certain critical threshold, the human family might be better without such a society.

In Deuteronomy, God reminds His Chosen People that "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice and cleaving to Him, for that means life to you and length of days" (30:19-20).

I began my remarks today by saying that alarmism is the wrong path for Catholics, and that separating ourselves from today's culture accomplishes very little beyond isolating us from others. I want to say that even more strongly as I conclude. Whatever lies ahead, the world doesn't need more anger, more fear and more enclaves. It needs seeds of renewal, and the leaven of Christian hope. That means us, and those whom we teach. The work each of you does today as a Catholic educator is *the most important enterprise in the world*. Forming disciples for the third millennium boils down, finally, to preaching, teaching and building the culture of life which flows from the cross of Jesus Christ.

"Therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live." Amen, and God bless you all.