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Addresses

## The Church as the bearer of wisdom

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A long time ago in Germany, a man kept a diary. And I want to share some of his words with you this evening, because they're a good place to begin our discussion.

The man wrote: "Speak both to the powerful and to every man — whoever he may be — appropriately and without affectation. Use plain language. Receive wealth or prosperity without arrogance, and be ready to let it go. Order your life well in every single act. Behave justly to those who are around you. Be vigilant over your thoughts, so that nothing should steal into them without being well-examined."

He wrote: "Every moment, focus steadily on doing the task at hand with perfect and simple dignity, and with feelings of affection and freedom and justice. Put away hypocrisy. Put away self-love and discontent with your portion in life. We were made for cooperation, and to act against one another is contrary to nature. Accept correction gladly. Teach without anger. Keep yourself simple, good, pure, serious, a friend of justice, kind, affectionate and strenuous in all proper acts." Finally, he wrote: "Take care never to feel toward those who are inhuman, the way they feel toward other men."

The dictionary on my shelf at home defines wisdom as "the understanding and pursuit of what is true, right or lasting." If that's so, and I believe it is, then the words from the diary we just heard, though loosely translated, certainly qualify as wisdom. They offer a map to living a worthy life — a life of interior peace flowing out of moral character and purpose. They're as valuable today as when they were first written.

But what's interesting is this: They were written more than 1,800 years ago. The author probably didn't intend to see his work published. He wrote mainly for himself — to strengthen himself in his convictions. And many of his thoughts, which we now call the *Meditations*, were written at war, at night, in winter, from the inside of a Roman military tent, on the German frontier. In his 19 years as emperor, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus had no long period of peace. He spent much of his life away from Rome with the army. He fought one brutal war after another against barbarian invaders, and he did it to defend a society that had already lost the values he held dear. Moreover, in the long run, he failed. The barbarians won. Rome unraveled. His own son Commodus became one of the worst tyrants in history.

So why do we remember him? We remember him because nothing is more compelling than a good man in an evil time. Marcus Aurelius was a person who had absolute power in a corrupt age. Yet despite that, he chose to seek what is true and right and lasting — and he disciplined his own life accordingly. Marcus Aurelius was a just man. In the context of his time, he was a moral ruler. How did he manage that? He did it by giving his heart *first* to philosophy, and *only then* to Rome. And what do we mean by philosophy? We can find the answer to that in the word itself. *Philos* is Greek for love; *sophia* is Greek for wisdom. Philosophy is — or at least it should be — the love and pursuit of wisdom. Philosophy is *not* the love of linguistic cleverness. It's *not* the love of intellect for the sake of intellect. In fact, Marcus Aurelius had a special disgust for intelligence without moral purpose. He wanted wisdom.

That's why he's important to us tonight. He wanted wisdom above everything else. And so should we. These three qualities — the true, the right and the lasting — are the pillars of the world. They're the tripod that supports a meaningful life. Whether you're rich or you're poor, emperor or peasant, Christian or pagan, all people in every age have a hunger for meaning in their lives. That hunger is a kind of sacrament. It's a sign that points to what Jesus said to Satan: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). Power, food, drink, sex, travel, knowledge, money, possessions — *none of these things finally lasts*. They can dull our inner hunger. But they can't make it go away. Wisdom consists in turning ourselves to the search for what *does* satisfy that hunger, and then pursuing it with our whole heart.

Which brings me to the three simple proposals I want to put before you this evening.

Here's my first proposal: The more secular we become — both as individuals and as a country — the less we care about the true, the right and the lasting. And here's the reason: We don't really believe these qualities exist. Philosophy today is an ailing discipline because our idea of "wisdom" has detached itself from higher, permanent truths about the human person. Wisdom has shrunk down to mean "common sense based on experience." But wisdom is much more than that: It's the moral memory of a culture. The more we reinterpret the past according to this or that political agenda, the less coherent our memory becomes . . . and the more irrelevant "wisdom" like the content of the Bible seems. Our moral vocabulary becomes confused. We begin to see and judge everything in terms of its *utility right now*. In other words, what's useful and productive, is seen as good. What isn't, is seen as bad.

Second proposal: Just as we transferred our belief in God to a belief in ourselves after the Enlightenment, now we're shifting a belief in ourselves to a belief in our tools. In doing that, we turn ourselves into the objects and the victims of our own knowledge. And we're doing this at a moment when our nuclear and genetic tools have more destructive power than at any time in history.

Third proposal: G.K. Chesterton once joked that the Church is the only thing that saves men and women from the "terrible indignity of being children of the age." What he meant is this: People who conform their hearts to the ideas of any particular age, disappear right along with the age. Nothing is older than yesterday's "new thing" and the people who worshiped it. We were created to live *in* the present but *for* eternity.

So I'd like to propose that it's exactly this eternal perspective that makes the Church the *only* reliable bearer of wisdom for the contemporary world. No one knows the human soul and the human experience as well as the Church. No one believes in the human enterprise more deeply than the Church. I spoke about Marcus Aurelius earlier, so here's a wonderful irony: In his lifetime, he bitterly persecuted Christians for being superstitious, obstinate and seditious. But if he were alive today, and alive with the same hunger for wisdom, Marcus Aurelius could very well be one of our saints, because what he sought from life, *only the Church really offers*.

Now let's go back and take each of these points in a little more detail.

First point: *The more secular we become, the less we care about the true, the right and the lasting*. At the heart of the secular worldview are several key ideas. God doesn't exist; or if He does, He's irrelevant to our public life. Religion is dangerous, because it divides people with conflicting fairytales about the purpose of life. What matters is here and now . . . and the principles governing our behavior here and now will change as our needs and circumstances change. Finally, a good society is one that provides the most benefits to the biggest number of people. What's true and right is conditioned by our circumstances, and nothing lasts because our needs change.

Obviously I'm oversimplifying things . . . but not by all that much. Wisdom in this kind of environment seems to shrivel into sophistry or cynicism. And that's exactly what's happened. As I was preparing for my talk tonight, I asked one of the philosophy professors at our seminary to name what he sees as the biggest problems in contemporary philosophy. Here's what he said:

Problem A: Philosophy today is eclectic. If we refuse *in principle* to accept any universal explanation of life, no real school of thought or shared understanding of the world can develop. Problem B: We've shifted from examining ideas to examining language. We're like mechanics who disassemble a car to study its pieces — but forget to put it back together so it runs.

It's revealing that so few of our American university philosophy departments have any use for metaphysics . . . and so many of them zero in on linguistics. Some of you may remember the "deconstruction" fad that gripped so many college faculties a decade ago, and it still has plenty of followers. The idea behind deconstruction is taking apart the stories and language of our culture to discover their hidden prejudices. But of course when you do that, you run a very big risk of turning into a skeptic about *all* meaning and *all* language — especially if you're engaged in this process without any larger understanding of the world that provides you with boundaries.

Skepticism is cheap. It's easy to take things apart. It's much harder to put them back together in a way that's morally compelling. As a result, Americans have become skeptical about our ability to really "know" anything, and we've simply stopped asking profound questions. We no longer really look for the true, the right and the lasting because we don't really believe they exist outside our own brain chemistry. We're agnostic about them in the same way we're agnostic about God.

Let's move on to my second point: *We stopped believing in God and began believing in ourselves. Now we're losing our faith in ourselves and putting our faith in our tools. We're becoming the objects and the victims of our own knowledge.* Back in 1998, I read a story in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* called "DNA is his paydirt." It had a crazy looking research scientist on the cover, and the point of the article was that biologists were racing the government to map the human genome in order to make a huge profit on the knowledge. It sounded like science fiction then. Now it's last week's news. And of course there's more. In the last month, both *Wired magazine* and *The New York Times* have reported that scientists will clone the first human child within the next 24 months, and probably within the next year. Many of the experts who were interviewed believe it's already been done.

It would be easy to sound alarmist here. That's not what I intend. A lot of good and ethical advances in the health sciences will come from this research. We need to welcome that with real gratitude to God. But we also need to remember the old saying that "fools with tools are still fools." If we can deconstruct our language, we can deconstruct ourselves. And if we don't have a shared moral vocabulary to prevent it, we will. It's already happening. Thirty years ago, if a scientist talked about hybridizing embryos to produce people to do certain jobs or live in certain environments, he was dismissed as a lunatic or a monster. Now we talk about the practical benefits . . . and the profits.

So we're kidding ourselves if we think our love affair with science is simply a love affair with knowledge. It's not. Knowledge is power, and what Americans really love is the *power knowledge brings*.

Half a century ago C.S. Lewis very shrewdly observed that " . . . the serious magical endeavor and the serious scientific endeavor are twins . . . . They were born of the same impulse . . . ."

He went on to say that "There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the wisdom of earlier ages. For the wise men of old, the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline and virtue. For magic and applied science alike, the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men; the solution is a technique; and both, in the practice of this technique, are ready to do things hitherto regarded as [terrible and] impious . . . ."

Americans love science for the technology we can extract from it, but technology does not have a soul. As easily as it gives us CD players and laptops, it also gives us Nagasaki , Zyklon B gas, and the abortion pill RU-486. The more we subordinate the sanctity of the human person to the tools we create, the less human we become. The job of Christian believers is to remind our culture that true and right and permanent things *do exist* about human nature — and if we abandon these things, we abandon our human identity.

Which brings me to my third and final point: *The Church is the only reliable bearer of wisdom for the contemporary world; the only reliable defender of the human person.* That's a big claim, especially in light of the many sins people in the Church have committed down through the centuries. But it's also the truth. The Church has always been for sinners. Her wisdom lies in seeing the world as God sees it; seeing the human person with the love and mercy that moved Jesus to weep at the tomb of Lazarus.

The Church knows, as the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes, that “there is nothing new under the sun” (1:9). While the terrain of the world changes, the nature of the human journey doesn’t. The poet Rainer Marie Rilke once described man as “by turns, clay and stars.” It’s always been so. We have a purpose. We’re meant for more than this life. Therefore, yesterday, today and tomorrow, the struggle is always the same: We’re in this world, and yet we hunger for the next; we’re imperfect, and yet we’re made for perfection.

The Church knows, as the Psalms and Proverbs teach, that only “the mouths of the righteous speak wisdom;” that “happy is the man who finds wisdom;” and that wisdom is a treasure “more precious than rubies.” We’re put in the world to be happy. But we can’t be happy without seeking the truth.

The Church also knows, with the author of the Book of Sirach, that “to fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (1:14). Why? Because God is our Father, the source and meaning of our lives; and humility in God’s presence is the sign of a sane person — a son or daughter who understands the real nature of the world, and humanity’s holy place in it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that the wise man “knows that reality is not built upon principles, but that it rests upon the living and creating God.” Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran theologian martyred by the Nazis, prayed daily for simplicity. He warned that, “the best informed man is not necessarily the wisest. Indeed there is a danger that precisely in the multiplicity of his knowledge he will lose sight of what is essential.” Throughout Scripture, God works through His *anawim* — the poor, the little people, the simple and pure of heart. Wisdom comes to the humble, not to the proud.

The Church teaches *in Gaudium et Spes* (15) that “the intellectual nature of man finds [its] perfection, as it should, in wisdom, which gently draws the human mind to look for and find what is true and good. Filled with wisdom, man is led through visible realities to those which cannot be seen.

The document continues, “Our age, more than any in the past, needs such wisdom if all that man discovers is to be ennobled by human effort. Indeed, the future of the world is in danger unless provision is made for men of greater wisdom.”

As my dictionary back home reminds us, wisdom is the pursuit of the true, the right and the lasting. In the record of Scripture and the witness of the Church, all these virtues find their anchor in God — and nowhere else but God.

The Prophet Jeremiah warned us in the first reading of the Liturgy last Sunday that “cursed is the one who trusts in human beings, who seeks his strength in flesh. He is like a barren bush in the desert that enjoys no change of season but stands in a lava waste, a salt and empty earth. [But] blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord. He is like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream” (17:5-8).

The reading from Genesis (11:1-9) at Mass today tells the story of the Tower of Babel, and it carries a similar caution. The pride of man leads to his own confusion and scattering. We usually assume that God intervened at Babel to punish, but I think God acted not to punish humanity, but to save it from itself. God said, “If now while they are one people, all speaking the same language, they have started to do this, *nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume.*” In an age of genetic manipulation, those words have a special meaning.

In his great work, *The City of God*, St. Augustine drew a portrait of the world divided into two cities — the City of God with its eyes set on heaven, and the City of Man rooted in pride and sin. He said that life consists in choosing one or the other. Each of us faces that same choice today. The wisdom which the Church offers the world appeals to the humble, not the proud, *and it’s the only wisdom that counts: the way to salvation.* This “salvation” is not a philosophy or an ideology, an idea or ideals. No one can love an idea, and at the heart of wisdom lives a hunger to love. Augustine says that all of the wisdom in the Old Testament literally takes on flesh in the New Testament. Jesus Christ is the Word of God — the *Wisdom* of God — incarnate. Jesus Himself says, “*I am the bread of life.*” He says, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*”

No one can love an idea. But we can love and be loved by Jesus Christ. We can meet and be met by God’s Son. In the end, the true, the right and the lasting lead to one place only. In the end, they meet in the God-become-man.

Thank you, and now let’s take some questions.