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Addresses

Mater et Magistra: Who the Church is, and why she teaches with authority

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Keynote Address

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How many of us here today have read the C.S. Lewis novel, *The Great Divorce*? Good. For anyone who doesn't know or doesn't remember the story, it's about a bus ride from hell to heaven. People get on the bus in hell, and they get off at the gateway to heaven. And once they arrive, they can freely choose to walk right into heaven, but there's one catch. They have to leave behind the sin that separated them from God in the first place.

I remember one particular soul in the story, because his sin perches on his shoulder like a pet animal, biting him and digging its nails into his skin. But when the angels ask permission to kill it, so the man can enter heaven, he almost can't let it go – because after all, it's familiar, because it's his, because it promises never to misbehave again.

Now, eventually he does give permission, the angels do kill it, and the man is set free to enter heaven. But here's the point of the story: Most of the souls on the bus – either out of pride, or fear or cynicism or indifference — get back on the bus. They go back to hell because they don't like heaven. They don't want it. And they reason they don't want it is simple. Heaven hurts. It's too real. The blades of grass are so intensely real that the souls from the bus cut their feet.

For Lewis, if God is our creator, then He's the source and meaning of everything real. God is real. Everything divorced from God isn't. God lives in the sunlight. We live in the shadow lands, and for eyes unaccustomed to the sun, the light can be painful.

Souls who turn away from God turn into the dark. They block God's light with the shadow of their own selfishness. Hell is the state of freely choosing that darkness forever. It's the state of choosing ourselves and our sins instead of choosing God; choosing the unreal instead of the real. And for souls addicted to the unreal, reality hurts – which is why Lewis tells us that "heaven is an acquired taste."

One of the features of modern life, unfortunately, is that we try to change reality to suit our tastes and behaviors, instead of changing our tastes and behaviors to suit reality. Bishops get a lot of mail, and most of it's important for one reason or another. But every once in awhile a letter or an email comes in that's really weird and really useful at the same time. About a week ago I got an email informing me that I'd been turned into a vampire. I like to keep up on current events, so I went to the web address where this was posted. It was an internet site for people involved in *Vampire: The Masquerade*, which is a role-playing game like *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Somebody turned me into one of the vampire characters, and I think I'm supposed to be offended, but actually I'm very grateful because they gave me a way to illustrate how we more and more prefer the unreal to the real.

Over the last 30 years, role-playing games have turned into a very big American subculture, and not just for teen-agers but for adults too. Some of you parents already know this. The point of a game like *Vampire* is that people get together, both in person and over the internet, to weave a story that becomes an alternate reality. Each of the persons weaving the story becomes a character, and he or she really “inhabits” that character in every way inside that alternate reality. Then the characters bond themselves into vampire clans who socialize together, make alliances, go to war with one another, and so on. It’s not just a game. It’s a self-contained world that the participants create and control. And for many of the players, it’s an alternate reality – a place to go to get away from the messiness of real life.

Computer games provide the same kind of escape. In fact, *Vampire* can also be played as a computer game on the internet, right now, against real people anywhere in the world. More than 92 percent of American children between the ages of 2 and 17 play video or computer games. Computer gaming — and especially internet, multiplayer gaming — is now the fastest growing segment of the American entertainment industry. Statistically, the most active gamers are young adult males and middle-aged women. The average age of an interactive game player is 28 years old and climbing. Nearly 64 million American played online computer games last year, and 43 percent of those were women.

And let me share with you just one more curious detail. One of the most popular computer games right now is *The Sims*, which is a “god game,” where the player takes on the role of a deity who creates and develops a planet or a society. In *The Sims*, the player creates, manages, nurtures or destroys a cyber-family, and it sold 1 million copies at \$50 a piece in its first 10 weeks.

What’s the point of this information, in light of our conference?

Author Sherry Turkle wrote some years ago that, “computer screens are the new location for our fantasies, both erotic and intellectual.” She said that, “We’re using life on computer screens to become comfortable with new ways of thinking about evolution, relationships, sexuality, politics and identity.” Neil Postman put it more bluntly when he warned that we’re “amusing ourselves to death” with “technological narcotics.” But either way, the world we all inhabit is becoming a world *hooked on unreality*, not just in computer games or on TV, but in almost every area of our lives.

Therapists tell us that sin doesn’t exist. Scientists tell us that God doesn’t exist. Linguists tell us that meaningful questions don’t exist, so don’t try to ask any. And what we’re too often left with is a vacuum of meaning in our lives that we try to fill with the unreality of possessions and distractions.

So the key question in every life becomes: How do we come to desire what’s *real*? How do we acquire the taste for heaven? The answer is: We learn it. And if we need to learn, someone has to teach us. Every life is an arc of growing. As we grow we observe more, and we want to understand more. We develop the hunger to learn. How and what we learn determines whom and what we become. That’s why parents and pastors, teachers and catechists, are so powerful. They shape our learning, and in doing that, they influence our choices throughout our lives.

Of course, while teachers are very important, not all teachers are equal. Some care about us more than others. Some have more skill than others. And some teachers teach the wrong things. As adults, one of the most important choices we make is which teachers we listen to – and which we teach our children to listen to.

The great majority of us here today are Catholic. What does that mean? Theologically, it means that we’ve been saved from sin in Baptism and incorporated into new life in the community of faith. It means that we accept Jesus Christ as our savior, and we commit ourselves to follow Him as His disciples. But what we *say*, what we *mean*, and then what we *do* aren’t always the same things. The space between our intentions and our actions is where daily life is lived. And in that battle zone, day in and day out, we have two very different teachers struggling for the podium in our hearts. The two teachers are the Church and the world. Each has a map for our lives, but the maps lead in very different directions.

For 40 years, Catholics have heard a steady chorus of how we need to be open to the world, learn from the world, honor the good things in the world, and be more humble in our approach to the world. All of this is true. God created the world, and He loves it, and He sent His only son to redeem it.

But at the same time, God wills that the world should be converted and sanctified, *not worshiped*. In his Gospel, St. John describes the “world” as everything which is aligned against God. Jesus shed His blood on the cross because that was the price of redeeming the world — from its sins and our sins. The cross was real. Christ’s suffering was real. And if the world isn’t a holier place today than yesterday, it’s because we Catholics have chosen the *unreality* of the world and its distractions over the *reality* of the cross.

We’ve assimilated. We’ve been too comfortable and accommodating. We’ve listened to the world too politely when it lies about abortion, or contraception, or divorce, or the death penalty, or our obligations to the poor, or the rights of undocumented workers, or the real meaning of pluralism, or our international responsibilities — and we haven’t shouted out the truth.

The world is a powerful and attractive teacher, but while it can often give us what we want, it can’t give us what we need. We need God. We’re hungry for things that are real because God — the source of everything real — made us to share in His life. And this is exactly the meaning of the Gospel last Sunday (Mt 4:1:11). Jesus says, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” And when Satan literally offers Christ the world and all its power if He’ll just make a deal, Jesus answers, “The Lord your God you shall worship, and Him alone you shall serve.”

Since the Jubilee Year, I’ve been thinking a lot about how we live our faith as Christians, compared to people in other religions. I’ve been struck by the posture of Muslims at prayer. The word “Islam” means *submission*, and Muslims embody that word in the way they pray. Islam didn’t invent the idea of submission. It was borrowed from Judaism and early Christianity — but Muslims made it the heart of their faith. We can relearn something about our own faith from the posture of Muslims at prayer — some important things about our own proper relationship with God.

How do we serve God? We serve Him by following His will with our whole body, mind and soul, and the one reliable teacher and guide we have to knowing His will is the Church. And I don’t mean the Church as we’d like her to be, but the Church Jesus intended her to be — His bride and our mother. Jesus said, “you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of death will not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18). He said, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 16:19).

Jesus sent His disciples out in His name, with His authority, to continue His work in the world as the Church — and only through the Church could we even be sitting here today talking about Jesus Christ. The fidelity of Catholics to the Church, generation after generation, even when her leaders have sometimes been weak or sinful — *that fidelity* is what carries the message of the Gospel through time. Without the Church, Jesus Christ cannot be known. So obedience to the Church and faithfulness to her teaching is not some sort of servitude; it’s a choice to participate in the act of giving life to the world. Without the Church, we have only the world, and the world is not enough to feed the hunger in our hearts.

I’ve always been puzzled by two things in my adult life as a Catholic. I’ve been puzzled, first, by people who claim that Vatican II somehow changed the identity or the mission of the Church. In fact the council says that the Church is “the universal sacrament of salvation” (LG, 48). The council says that “Christ is the light of humanity . . . and that light of Christ [shines] out visibly from the Church” (LG, 1). The council says there can be no distinction drawn between the institutional Church and the “real” Church — they are one and the same. The council says that, “the whole Church is missionary and the work of evangelization [is] the fundamental task of the people of God” (AG, 35). The council says that outside Jesus Christ, “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which they can be saved” (GS, 10).

I’ve been puzzled, second, by people who misunderstand the ministry of Blessed Pope John XXIII. John had a short pontificate and died before the council ended, so it’s easy for some biographers to create the impression that, if he had only lived a little longer, he would have changed so much more about the Church. That’s a fantasy. Nothing in his life or his writing supports that idea, and frankly that kind of misrepresentation dishonors the memory of a very saintly man. In fact, John XXIII saw the Catholic Church as the soul of the world — and he said so in the opening lines of his great 1961 encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*:

"Mother and teacher of all nations – such is the Catholic Church in the mind of her founder, Jesus Christ; [her vocation is] to hold the world in an embrace of love, that men in every age should find in her their own completeness in a higher order of living, and their ultimate salvation. She is the 'pillar and the ground of truth.' To her was entrusted by her holy founder the twofold task of giving life to her children and of teaching them and guiding them – both as individuals and as nations – with maternal care" (MM, 1).

When we try to soften the content of the council, or rewrite the meaning of John XXIII's life, or sweeten the mission of the Church in the world, what we're really doing is building an alibi for our own lack of courage. For each of us as a believer, there's no way around Christ's mandate to engage *and convert* the world. Jesus said, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28:19). And what that also means, is that there's no way around the cross, because the cross is the salvation of the world, and as disciples, we're meant to take part in the cross.

The great Jewish Catholic writer Leon Bloy once said, "man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence." Cardinal Augustine Meyer once wrote, "nothing great is ever achieved without suffering." And Pope John Paul II once said, "the redemption was accomplished through the suffering of Christ [and] every man has his own share in the redemption. Each one [of us] is also called to share in that suffering through which the redemption was accomplished."

Does this mean that Christians should enjoy pain? No, of course not. But suffering pointed to a higher purpose *becomes something greater than itself*. Olympic athletes win their medals by "suffering" the discipline of their sport, which stretches them toward greatness. Some kind of suffering — the loss of a loved one, or an illness, or a broken relationship — forces its way into every life. We can't avoid it, but we *can* choose how we use it. Our suffering will either *shape us*, the way a burden bends the back of a mule, or *we will shape it* into a prayer for other people and something beautiful for God.

What's the lesson for each of us here today? Four things.

First, if we take nothing else away with us from our time at this conference this weekend, we need to stop thinking of the Church as some kind of religious corporation, and start treating the Church as our mother and teacher. The Church is not an it. The Church is a she. We can love our mother; we can't love an institution. And while the Church has institutional forms, she is always much more than the offices that serve her mission. When we talk about the Church as if she were just another impersonal bureaucracy, what we're really doing is creating an excuse to ignore her when she teaches.

Lumen Gentium 68 reminds us that Mary, "the mother of Jesus . . . is the image and beginning of the Church as [she] is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise [the Church] shines forth on earth until the day of the Lord shall come (cf. 2 Pt 3:10), a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim people of God." That's the image we need to nourish in our hearts to keep us focused on the *reality* of the Church that gives life to her institutional forms.

Second, if we say we're Catholic, we need to act like it. When Catholic Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia publicly disputes Church teaching on the death penalty, the message he sends is not all that different from Frances Kissling disputing what the Church teaches about abortion. I don't mean that abortion and the death penalty are identical issues. They're not, and they don't have equivalent moral gravity. But the impulse to pick and choose what we're going to accept is exactly the same kind of "cafeteria Catholicism" in both cases.

Very often we treat the Church the same way we treat our flesh and blood mothers. We want the mommy part, but we don't want the teacher part. We want her around to feed us, encourage us and comfort us when things are going badly. But we don't want her advice, especially when it interferes with our plans. When Pope John XXIII's encyclical first came out, the conservative author William Buckley, who didn't like the Pope's economics, wrote a famous column called, "Mater si, Magistra no!" – mother yes, teacher no. That led Louise and Mark Zwick to characterize him in the *Houston Catholic Worker* as "the inventor of cafeteria Catholicism and the pro-choice stance (at least in economics), who accepted encyclicals he agreed with and rejected others." I think they're right.

Third, if we teach and preach in the name of the Church, we need to do it fully, zealously and with all the persuasive skill God gives us. All of us sooner or later get tempted to edit what the Church teaches so we can please our audience. But if we refuse to teach the things we disagree with, or we teach them with a “wink and a nod” to let others know that we don’t really believe what the Church says – that’s dishonest. It’s a kind of pride that puts our personal judgments above the judgments of the Church and her spouse, who is Jesus Himself.

Fourth and finally, we need to live in a way that honors each other, and honors the mission of the Church — because in us and through our actions, the outside world will judge the Gospel we claim to believe. If the pain now taking place in Boston teaches us anything, it’s that nothing can wound the Church more deeply than the sins and the indifference of her own people, especially people in ministry.

I want to leave you with two images.

The Gospel of John, 19:26-27, says that on Golgotha “when Jesus saw His mother and the disciple that He loved standing near, He said to his mother, ‘woman behold your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother!’ And from that hour, the disciple took her into his own home.” Each of us today is the disciple Jesus loved and loves. And from the cross He is asking us to take the Church into our hearts as John took Mary into his home, to defend her and care for her and advance her mission in the world.

The second image comes from Robert Frost and the last few lines from one my favorite poems. I’m sure you’ll know it:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Following Him may be “the road less traveled,” but it’s the one road that leads us to reality and joy and the light of God’s love.

For me, the guide on that road has always been the Church. The greatest blessing I can give you today or any day, is my prayer that she will become the same for you.