



That others may hear and believe

February 27, 1998

This address was delivered to Catholic educators at The Mile Hi Congress on February 27, 1998.

I.

When Bill offered me the opportunity to speak at the Mile Hi awhile back, I was very glad to say yes, because I really do believe that this congress is one of the most important meetings each year in our local Church, and I'm happy and grateful to see you here. All of us — parents, priests, bishops and educators — share one important role in the Church: We're teachers. That's our mandate as believers. Jesus told us to go make disciples of all nations, and we do that in two ways. We preach the Gospel, and we teach the faith. The vocation of teaching others about Jesus and His Church is one of the most important things a Christian can do. When her teachers teach the truth with courage, faithfulness and conviction, the Church grows strong. When they don't, she grows weak. It's that simple.

I'm a Capuchin Franciscan, so I have a great love for simplicity. We need more of it in the world, and we also need more of it in the Church. Jesus was simple. Not simple as in ignorant; but simple as in focused. He spoke clearly and directly. He anchored Himself in the essentials of His Father's will. We need to do the same. This is the reason why the Mile Hi is so important. Whatever skills and tools and professional methods we learn here are valuable. But they're not finally the reason for this congress. This congress exists to renew our zeal as missionaries. In Catholic education, *every teacher is a missionary*. It follows that we can't be good teachers if we're not on fire for the truth we teach.

Back in December, I wrote a pastoral letter called "Good News of Great Joy." Those of you who read it know that this theme of mission and evangelization is really the heart of my concern as a bishop. Those of you who didn't read it, don't feel too bad. If you have trouble reading pastoral letters, I don't really enjoy writing them. In fact, I think most of the time, a good homily delivered from the heart is the best way to reach anyone with any message. But some things are important enough to spend more time thinking about and developing. Some issues really do need the breathing room of a pastoral letter — and recovering our missionary energy, and our missionary *realism*, as a Church is one of them.

What do I mean by missionary realism? That's an odd term. Let me explain it this way. When I issue a pastoral letter about evangelization on Christmas Eve, it connects very comfortably with all the warm feelings of the Christmas season. And that's appropriate: Every birth is "good news of great joy." But the deeper joy of the Christian Gospel doesn't happen at Christmas. It happens on the other side of Golgotha. There's no resurrection without the crucifixion.

All of us love Christmas. That's the easy part of the message. There's much less consumer-demand for Good Friday. Yet the cross is the manner by which Christ accomplishes our redemption. And only in being nailed to the cross with Him, can we rise with Him on Easter. That part of the Gospel is harder to preach. It's also harder for each of us to accept personally. We Christians all talk a good line about suffering . . . but very few of us want to experience too much of it.

I mention this because, in developed countries like our own, when we talk about Jesus Christ — and our own lives as Christians — we tend to soften the rough edges. We leave out the part about the bloody nails. But the message makes no sense without the nails. Jesus Himself was very blunt about the cost, as well as the rewards, of discipleship: “Take up your cross and follow me.” Expect to be reviled. Expect to be persecuted. Expect to be humiliated. The good news is not a message of niceness. It is a revolutionary message of new life in Christ through death to the self . . . and the world usually doesn’t want to hear it, and will often resist it with violence.

Over this past weekend I had the privilege of visiting Rome for the consistory where Archbishop Stafford became Cardinal Stafford. It was a wonderful moment, filled with a great deal of joy. But the red garments of a cardinal signify blood, and they’re a constant reminder of the readiness the wearer must have to shed his blood for the faith. Christian Rome is literally built on the bones of martyrs — generations of women and men who shed their blood as witnesses for Jesus Christ. In shedding it, they became the seeds of the faith we inherit today. This is what I mean by “missionary realism.” It’s the readiness to put a burning heart-and-will for Christ behind our words, no matter what the price. Nothing good or holy is had without a cost, and how much would we be willing to pay? What is our faith really worth — and are we willing to prove that with our lives? If we want to be good teachers, we must be good missionaries. And if we want to be good missionaries, we must be willing to be martyrs. And if the circumstances of our lives do not require a witness in blood, we can still give freely of ourselves in service.

II.

How do these thoughts apply to our vocation as Catholic educators, here and now? Well, we don’t have to visit Africa or Asia to do the work of missionaries. Our mission territory is right in our own backyard, throughout the United States and here in northern Colorado. We find it in the families who send their children to our religious education programs and schools. It’s true that we have a tremendous Christian heritage in this country, and obviously many millions of Americans still actively practice their faith. Many also witness their faith through charitable, social and political action.

But I suspect it’s also true that religious sentiment is fading as a force in our behavior. So often today, religious affiliation is just a veneer that covers up a practical unbelief. And we all know one or two young adults who have just enough formal religion to be vaccinated against real faith. They were educated in the Church, and they think they know everything about her — but they really know nothing at all. At the same time, Colorado is the third least “churched” state in the union. Many Coloradans have no formal ties to *any* religious body. So as a culture, we have the memory of faith and a kind of nostalgia for God, but we’re losing our moral vocabulary as we pull away from our religious tradition.

None of this analysis, of course, should be classwork for your second or fourth or seventh graders. If you start rambling on about “alienation from our religious roots” and our “nostalgia for God”, they’ll look at you like you came from Mars. They may look at you that way *already*, but this would make it worse. These observations *are* valuable, though, as background. It’s important for us as adult Catholic educators to understand the terrain we’re cultivating, so that we can cultivate it more fruitfully for the Lord. And in that regard, I want to briefly mention five main ideas or themes where we need to focus our special efforts as teachers.

The first is *silence*. Silence is holy. It’s where God talks to the soul. We don’t have enough of it, and we need to help young people recover it. . How many times have you seen teen-agers drifting through Cherry Creek mall with headphones wired to their ears? Don’t you wonder why they need the noise? What is it about the world around them which is so empty that it needs to be filled up artificially with the latest CD?

I don't have any particular antagonism for rock music. Some of it sounds pretty good. I do think the lyrics are sometimes very disturbing, but that's not my point. You and I should be interested in what bores or frightens young people about the *absence of noise*. I have a fear that we've created a huge hole in the universe where the meaning of life used to be, and noise is the only thing now which keeps it from being completely empty. Noise is one of our drugs. It's how we avoid reflecting on important things too deeply. Most you know C.S. Lewis, and many of you will remember his book, *The Screwtape Letters*. In that book, noise is the music of hell; it's what hell is filled with, and it's what the devil Screwtape wants to fill all creation with. I think if C.S. Lewis were alive today, he would say we've outdone Screwtape by our own free will. And the result is that we cannot hear God when He tries to speak to us.

That brings me to my second point. Our culture not only drowns out the voice of God; we push Him completely out of sight. We live in a social environment where every kind of outlandish cartoon character has airtime, where the idea of miracles is eclipsed by flying and morphing super-heroes, but where God is almost completely absent from the context of children's TV. It's such an obvious statement, but we need to re-introduce children to the person of God; God not as a force or an abstract idea or a science-fiction energy field, but as a Father with a plan for our happiness who is intimately involved with our lives, and interested in their eternal outcome.

We can love a Father. We cannot know, much less love, a force. The personhood of God, especially in His Trinitarian reality, implies relationship — not only within the Trinity, but with humanity and all creation. And every relationship implies mutual rights, responsibilities and purpose, which is exactly what's missing from the lives of so many young people. Encountering the Person of God is exactly like encountering the man or woman who will be your spouse — it changes everything. It gives you a purpose. It orders everything else about your life. It's why the novelist Francois Mauriac wrote that "Anyone who has truly known God can never be cured of Him."

My third concern is the *nature of truth*. A sense of absolute right and wrong is absent not only from many of today's children — but much more alarmingly, from many of their parents. As we drift away from our traditional religious moorings, we become more and more relativist in our judgment, and less and less able to understand truth as something permanent and objective — that unique thing outside ourselves which is the foundation of human character. This is why we get the spectacular nonsense of candidates running for office on a platform of high ideals . . . and then telling us that their personal moral behavior has nothing to do with their public service, once they're elected.

Look at the political environment in Washington these days. It would be laughable, if it weren't so fatal to public trust in our leaders and institutions. In America in 1998, what's "true" is whatever a spin doctor can establish as plausible and defensible. We're becoming a people of alibis instead of principles. And in doing it, we're even less able to understand the deeper, divine truth which takes on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. For many Americans who call themselves Christians, Jesus' words — "I am the way, the truth and the life" — have become little more than appealing, but obscure, poetry.

My fourth point is the idea of *freedom*. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, *and the truth will make you free*." The truth — God's truth incarnate in Jesus Christ — is what makes us free . . . not 36 different brands of detergent, or a variety of alternative lifestyles. "Choice" is not necessarily freedom, and the *idolatry of choice* is just another form of slavery; another form of the noise Screwtape talked about. Once we lose our grip on truth, we inevitably lose our freedom because we no longer have a way of morally ordering our choices. Our choices become our distractions and our chains. And that's not what God wants.

In Galatians 5:1, Paul reminds us that, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." But what does that freedom look like? Paul tells us that we ". . . are called to freedom brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but *through love be servants of one another*" (Gal 5:13). Real freedom is rooted in self-sacrifice. And that same sacrificial understanding of freedom appears throughout Ephesians 5: ". . . *be subject to one another* out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord . . . Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her . . . Children, obey your parents in the Lord . . ." Freedom is not license. Freedom is not selfishness. Freedom is not choices-without-purpose. Real freedom is ". . . to walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us . . ." And it's a walk that leads to the cross. We need to take that walk ourselves, and model it to the students we teach.

And this leads to my final thought: Whatever her faults, the Church is the *only, truly free, community in creation*. Not “free” in the mixed-up language of our political culture, but really free; free in the deeper sense we find in Scripture. She is the family in which we encounter Christ, who is the way the truth and the life; the same Christ who said “no one comes to the Father except through me.” She is the vessel through which God pours hope and holiness into the world. She is the silence where we can hear God calling our name. She is the path we take to answer Christ’s call, “*Come follow me,*” and also His command, “*Go, make disciples of all nations.*” When our teaching is obedient to her teaching, it is obedient to His will. Our job as Catholic educators is to draw the souls we teach into the Church, into her freedom, into His will. If we can begin to do that, God will change the world.

III.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” He also said, “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” But He also said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword” (Mt 10:34). Those are hard words for the Prince of Peace, but they make sense in the face of the three great opponents of the Gospel in every age — the world, the flesh and the devil. We tend to frame the struggle between virtue and sin in slightly different words today, but the reality is exactly the same. The truth will set us free, but it won’t make us comfortable — and it will certainly make the enemies of Christ bitter not only toward Him, but toward us.

When I was confirmed, the bishop gave me a light slap on the cheek to remind me of the persecution that might come because of my faith. I became a soldier of Christ in a spiritual war that has gone on throughout history on every continent, in every culture and in every individual heart. I suppose expressions like “spiritual warfare” fell out of favor in the 1960s because they had a flavor of militarism or preconciliar theology. But I think it’s time to reclaim the truth at the heart of those words. Spiritual warfare is real. We *are* soldiers of Christ, and we *are* engaged in a war for the soul of the world with spiritual enemies who hate the human person and all of God’s creation. The cost of that war is the blood of martyrs, and the history of this century is written in it. That’s what I mean by missionary realism. If you teach the truth, brothers and sisters, you are the friend of God. And if you are the friend of God, *you are the enemy of those who revile Him*. St. Paul says it most powerfully in Ephesians 6, 10-17:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

“Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the Gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.

Catholic education cannot be done by the disaffected or lukewarm. It’s for people who have a fire in their heart for God; who love the Church and her teachings; who want to be a *lion for the lord* and not a housecat. It’s for missionaries and soldiers of mercy, justice and truth. It’s for souls who see their own suffering as a small price to pay, to be part of God’s great work of redemption.

The “good news of great joy” is that the hardest victory is already won. Christ has opened the door to new life. Our job is to follow Him and lead others to Him. I know you have that hunger in your own hearts, or you wouldn’t be here today. As we begin this season of Lent in this Year of the Holy Spirit, I ask you to pray for me — as I will pray for you — to have the same courage which the Apostles found at Pentecost: to preach Jesus Christ with passion and conviction, in season and out, so that others may hear and believe.

God bless each of you, and thank you for the tremendous work you do.