



Speaking the truth in love: toward a new apologetics for the third millennium

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Before we get started, let me ask a couple of questions.

How many of you use the internet? Good. How many of you know a company called Macromedia? A few. Good.

Macromedia is a software company. It makes internet tools and technologies which help people create content for multimedia and the world wide web.

Macromedia has some very powerful competitors, including Microsoft. But it's been able to survive — and succeed — against these much larger competitors, because it stays very focused on its core business. Here is its mission statement: "Macromedia exists to bring life to the web." Period. That's it. Simple, direct and no-nonsense. I respect that. People who know their strengths; who know their mission; and who pursue their mission singleheartedly with all of their strengths — these people have credibility, and we should listen to them carefully when they speak about the things they know.

Now, here's why I've told you this story.

Most people know that Homer was a Greek poet; and most people probably know something about his two great poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. But most of us don't realize that when these poems were first created 25 centuries ago, they weren't written down. They were part of an oral tradition. Each of these poems has about 11,000 lines — and they were recited by professional bards from memory. What's equally amazing is that thousands of common people would gather to hear these performances, and would listen to them spellbound, for hour after hour. Of course, when I say "amazing," I mean amazing to us in 1999. It wasn't amazing to the Athenians or Corinthians of 450 B.C. For them, it was normal to lose yourself in a poet's voice for an entire evening.

And this wasn't just a strange, ancient-Greek habit. Even a hundred years ago, people in our own country could stay focused on a conversation or an issue for long periods of time. The Lincoln-Douglas public debates went on for hours. And average citizens would listen to them, ask questions, argue with the speakers, break for dinner, and then come back for more speeches and discussions.

Then things changed.

Fifty years ago, television arrived.

Forty years ago, Richard Nixon became the first presidential candidate to lose an election because he looked bad on camera.

Thirty years ago the first televised war took over our living rooms.

Twenty years ago, author Neil Postman began to warn us that “sound-bite politics” was killing our ability to understand and discuss serious issues. He also observed that the main contribution of television to American public life was to ensure that short, fat or unpleasant-looking people would never again get elected president — even if they had the wisdom of Solomon, and the virtue of Mother Teresa.

Ten years ago the internet began to emerge.

And last week, at a seminar in Denver, a Macromedia software executive — remember Macromedia? — announced that web-surfers have an even shorter attention span than TV watchers. In fact, according to this executive, most major companies now assume that they have a *maximum* of seven seconds to download their home page and get their products in front of the typical web user, before he or she clicks through to something else. Seven seconds. That’s about the time it takes for a deep breath. That’s our culture’s emerging attention span, and I believe it, because Macromedia knows its business. The point is: How do you preach Jesus Christ in seven seconds? How do you defend the faith in a deep breath? It’s a sobering thought — with big pastoral implications for each of us.

The good news is this: As much as things change, they also remain the same. The terrain of history, culture and technology is always changing. But the yearnings of the human heart never really change. People need to love and be loved. And they have a deep hunger for beauty and for truth. That doesn’t go away just because you have a faster modem.

No matter how rocky the soil of our culture may seem, we need to dig deeper. These are fertile times for the Gospel. This is great soil for the message of Jesus Christ. In fact, the harvest can be very rich if we just do what Jesus asks us to do. If a software company can be singlehearted in its mission, surely followers of Jesus Christ can do at least that well. Our job this evening — in the time we have together — boils down to answering three simple questions: What is our mission? What are the obstacles we face in accomplishing it? And how do we overcome those obstacles to do what we need to do? So let’s begin.

I. THE MISSION

Some of you’ve probably heard the joke about my friend, Jack. If so, I’m sorry. You’re going to hear it again, because it helps me make a point.

Jack’s a good young Catholic man with money problems. So he goes to church, and very piously and confidently asks God to let him win the lottery. The next lottery drawing comes, and he doesn’t win. So he goes back to church and prays even more earnestly — and this time Jack really tells God, in a lot more detail, how desperate he is. The next lottery drawing comes, and he loses again. So he goes back to church again, and now he’s begging like he’s never prayed before, and just as he’s working himself into a frenzy, God whispers to him: “Jack, please, meet me half way: Buy a ticket.”

God will work miracles, but He wants our cooperation. If the world isn’t a better place — if the world doesn’t know Jesus Christ — don’t blame God. We just need to look in the mirror. Carrying on the work of Jesus is what *we’re* here for. That’s why He called us. That’s our mission. In fact, the mission statement of the Catholic faith hasn’t changed in 2,000 years. It’s Matthew 28:19-20:

“Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

Simple, direct, no-nonsense. It’s the greatest mission statement ever written. But in reading and hearing this Scripture so many times in daily life, we can easily become dull to its power. So let’s examine it.

First, it’s not a suggestion or request. It’s a command. It’s a mandate. If you say you believe in Jesus Christ, you must preach the Gospel. You must teach the faith. There’s no Option B. Jesus doesn’t need our polite approval or intellectual assent. He doesn’t want our support from the sidelines. He wants us — our love, our zeal, our whole being — because through us He completes the work of salvation, which has never been more urgent for the world than right now.

Second, Jesus isn't talking to somebody else. He's talking to you and me. "Go teach all nations" couldn't be more personal. Jesus wants you, and you and you. Evangelizing is not just a job for "professionals." We're the professionals by virtue of our baptism. If the responsibilities of your life prevent you from going to China or Africa, then witness Jesus Christ where you are — to your children, your spouse, your neighbors, your coworkers, your friends. Find ways to talk about your faith with the people you know, and work to conform your life to the things you say you believe. Make your actions support your words, and your words, your actions.

Third, if Jesus speaks to each of us personally, it's because each of us personally makes a difference. God didn't create us by accident. He made us to help Him sanctify this world, and to share His joy in the next. The biggest lie of our century is that mass culture is so big and so complicated that an individual can't make a difference. This is false. This is the Enemy's propaganda, and don't believe it. We are not powerless. Twelve uneducated Jews turned the Roman world on its head. One Francis Xavier brought tens of thousands of souls to Jesus Christ in the Far East.

If Christians were powerless, the world wouldn't feel the need to turn them into martyrs. The Gospel has the power to shake the foundations of the world. It has done so many times. It continues to do so. But it can't do anything, unless it is lived and preached and taught. This is why the simplest Christian is the truest and most effective revolutionary. The Christian changes the world by changing one heart at a time.

Fourth, Jesus doesn't ask the impossible. If He tells us to teach all nations, it's because it can be done. Nothing is impossible with God. When St. Paul began his work, conversion of the Roman world seemed impossible. But it happened. When Mother Teresa began her work in Calcutta, no one had any idea she would touch people of all nations with her example of Christ's love. But it happened. Don't worry about the odds. They don't concern us. Just begin the work. If it's His work, God will do the rest.

Fifth, "Go teach all nations" means all nations — the whole world and all its peoples. Jesus is not just "an" answer for some people. Or "the" answer for Western culture. He's not just a teacher like Buddha, or a prophet like Mohammed. He is the Son of God. And what that means is this: Jesus is the answer for every person, in every time, in every nation. There are no exceptions. There is no other God, and no other Savior. Jesus Christ alone is Lord. If anyone is saved, he is saved only through Jesus Christ, whether he knows the name of Jesus or not. Ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues are very valuable things. They form us in humility; they deepen our understanding of God; and they teach us respect for our brothers and sisters who don't share our faith. But they do not absolve us from preaching the truth. They are never an excuse for a lack of zeal. If we really believe the Catholic faith is the true path to God, then we need to share it joyfully, firmly, with all people and in all seasons.

A colleague told me a story recently that shows what real missionary zeal looks like.

This colleague was living in California, in Beverly Hills at the time, in one of the city's last rent-controlled apartments. The neighborhood was heavily non-Christian, and every Sunday he and his family would be the only ones on the block who showed up at Mass. One Sunday morning he had to leave in the middle of Mass and run home for a bottle, or diapers, or something for the baby — and as he pulled up near his home, he saw a young man in a starched white shirt with his two young children, going from door to door with a Bible. He was a member of some Evangelical church, and of course, he wasn't having much luck. He would knock on a door, say a few words about Jesus, and sometimes the people were polite, and sometimes they weren't. But in every case, the young man had the door closed in his face . . . and so he moved on to the next house with his children.

This colleague of mine forgot all about the diapers. He watched the young man and his children for about 20 minutes. And it left an impression on him that remains in his heart to this day. You see, that young Evangelical man was not only unafraid to be humiliated for the Lord. He was *unafraid to let his children see him humiliated*. That's witness. That's confidence in the truth of the Gospel. There's a lesson here: Defending the faith means first of all preaching the faith. And if we Catholics lose people to the fundamentalist sects, we have no one to blame but ourselves for letting the fire for God go out in our own hearts.

Sixth, it's not enough just to preach Jesus Christ and teach the faith. It's also our job to actually bring others into a real, eternal friendship with God. And what creates this new relationship with God? Baptism — in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The sacrament of baptism matters. In fact, all of the sacraments matter enormously, because they're the normal means by which our Father shares His mercy and love with us.

Through the waters of baptism comes the gift of the Holy Spirit. And because of this gift, baptism gives us new life in Christ, washes away our sin and incorporates us into the community of faith. Baptism commissions and empowers us as apostles. It's at the heart of the Second Vatican Council's teaching about the role of laypeople. The council's *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* puts it this way:

"In the Church there is a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission . . . [T]he laity, made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ [through their baptism] . . . are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like a leaven, with the ardor of the spirit of Christ" (2).

Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation, *The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful*, says it even more urgently:

"Because the lay faithful belong to Christ, Lord and King of the Universe, they share in His kingly mission and are called by Him to spread that Kingdom in history" (14). Elsewhere in the same document he reminds us that, "Since the work that awaits everyone in the vineyard of the Lord is so great, there is no place for idleness" (3).

The bottom line is this: Our mission is to advance God's work of redeeming and sanctifying the world, and to bring all people to salvation in Jesus Christ. That's our mission *in community* as a Church; and *individually* as believers. We own it. We can't delegate it away. And it's the same mission today as it was a hundred years ago, 500 years ago and 1,000 years ago. Only the terrain has changed.

II. THE TERRAIN

Let's remember that the theme of this conference is "defending the faith." And my topic for this session is "toward a new apologetics for the third millennium." We've been dealing indirectly with both, but now's a good time to focus on and refresh our understanding of a few key words.

Faith is the acceptance of the word of another. We routinely have faith in our parents, friends and spouses because we know they're trustworthy. In the case of our religious convictions, faith is one of the theological virtues, along with hope and love. It's the free gift of God, by which He enables us to believe the truth He reveals about the meaning of creation — even though we may not fully see or understand it. *Evangelizing* is the task of spreading our faith to others. And *apologetics* is a kind of subset of evangelization. It involves explaining and defending what we believe to others in a persuasive way.

I'm not really sure we need a "new" apologetics, because the content of our faith hasn't changed, and the "old" apologetics of Augustine, Irenaeus, Thomas Aquinas, Charles Borromeo and G.K. Chesterton is still very persuasive to anyone with an open mind. But the style of some apologetics in recent centuries has had one big flaw. It has lacked love. The early history of the Church is peppered with accounts of pagans who converted because they saw how much the Christians loved each other. That still happens today, of course. But far too much of our energy over the past 500 years has gone into doctrinal trench warfare, Christian against Christian, while the rest of the world has interpreted our divisions as a sign of our bankruptcy. You remember the hymn, "They Will Know We are Christians by Our Love." Well, what will they know by our bickering?

One of the gifts which Vatican II left us, is the insight that what unites us as followers of Jesus Christ is much more important than what divides us. I'm not suggesting that the differences among Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants don't count. They do count. They're often rooted in serious issues of truth, and we can't just ignore them or wish them away. Out of respect for each other, we need to address our differences frankly and patiently, for as long as God wants it to take for us to achieve real unity. But we need to do it as brothers, not enemies. St Paul, who was certainly the greatest of all Christian apologists, tells us in Ephesians that we should be "speaking the truth in love." He says pretty much the same thing in 1 Corinthians:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal . . . If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, and have not love, I gain nothing."

It doesn't matter if we win the intellectual debate with a fundamentalist or an unbeliever. We only really "win" if we love and respect that person — while we also defend our faith. Martin Luther King said that, "We will change people only if we love them — and they *know* that we love them." That's the kind of "new" apologetics we need. That's the kind of apologetics which can touch human hearts, because the heart is always hungry for joy and beauty, truth and hope . . . and love enkindles all these things.

That's so vital to remember — because surely this is one of saddest centuries in all of history. And by "sad," I mean literally filled with a sense of loss. Some of you probably know the work of John Keegan. He's a wonderful British author and military historian, and he just published a very powerful new book on the First World War. The book is not just a story of battles. It's really about the destruction of an entire worldview. When the Titanic sank in 1912, most of the men on board voluntarily gave up their seats in the lifeboats to save women and children. That was the code. That was their expected commitment to self-sacrifice, honor and duty. It was sewn into the fabric of an educated man's character.

Is this the view of our world today?

By 1918, nearly 1 million men had died in the fighting around Verdun alone, and the sheer volume and senselessness of the killing swept away a generation of European males. Anyone who has lost a loved one knows that it can darken the heart for months, and sometimes for years. Multiply that by tens of millions, and you have the spirit of despair which descended on this century after World War I. The Great War not only wrecked a political, economic and moral order. It shook people's confidence in themselves, in their tools, in their institutions — and even in a loving God.

That's important, because we're hardwired to need God . . . and if we lose confidence in the true God, we'll replace Him with something or someone else. The rest of the century shows that. We've tried again and again to become gods ourselves through this or that political ideology; or genetics; or technology; or economic power. And always we repeat the same cycle of pride in our own ability; failure at our own hands; pessimism about our failure; followed by new pride in what seems to be a new answer; and so on.

The story of this century, as we close it, is the tension we feel between a huge confidence in what we can achieve, and fear that we don't *really* understand all the forces we've unleashed. Once we let go of God, all of our certitudes begin to unravel. He's the glue. God is what holds things together. He created us with tremendous intelligence and dignity, but without Him, we're just not smart enough and "whole" enough to give ourselves a common meaning. We can't even keep control of our tools.

In 1995, the American Association of School Administrators published the results of a survey which asked parents, teachers, leaders from various professional fields and members of the general public, what kind of educational content would be important for students graduating in the 21st century. Computer skills and media technology were ranked higher than basic ethical values like honesty and tolerance by every group but the leaders. Good citizenship and the love of learning were low on the list. And study of the classics like Plato and Shakespeare was near the bottom.

Think about that for a moment. What it means is this: Most of the surveyed adults, including the parents, ranked ingenuity above nobility; tools above character. That's called idolatry. And no matter how well-intentioned, it's unworthy of the human person. I don't mean that computers are bad, or media technology is something we shouldn't master. Just the opposite. Used properly, these things can ennoble people and give glory to God. But they are not a substitute for life in the Spirit and things of real substance.

William Gibson wrote a classic science-fiction novel 15 years ago called *Neuromancer*, and in it, he coined — or at least popularized — a word that's become part of our daily vocabulary, "cyberspace." He defined cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination," a fantasy made real by the free collusion of millions of networked minds. The only way we can live without God is through a similar kind of consensual hallucination. That's at the heart of our addictions to speed and noise; our sadness; our impatience and restlessness; our dwindling attention spans; our pride and fear.

I think that's what hell must be like.

The biggest challenge to Christ's missionary mandate in our lifetime is simply waking people up from this hallucination; helping people find again the *real* joy, hope, beauty, silence, intimacy and love which make life worth living. The world will never find these things without Jesus Christ. And it will never hear His name unless we speak it — and the hour is late.

The good news is that it's not too late. The evidence might argue that it's been a very good century for the bad guys . . . but in the words of the great language scholar, Yogi Berra, "It ain't over till it's over." And we all came here tonight to do something about that.

III. WHAT WE CAN DO

This past weekend, the New York Times Sunday Magazine published a cover story on the work of the late Stanley Kubrick. When I was younger and still discerning my vocation, I also toyed with the idea of becoming a stuntman or a film director. I've always enjoyed films, and I've seen a lot of them, although as a bishop I don't get much opportunity to go to the theater any more. So I read the Times story with a lot of interest. Kubrick directed some very influential movies — *Paths of Glory*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *2001*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Shining*, *Full Metal Jacket*. His last movie, *Eyes Wide Shut*, opens posthumously next week. I don't think anyone will mistake it for *The Song of Bernadette*, but whether it's good or very bad, the collection of Kubrick's work is still pretty impressive.

I mention Kubrick because I think all art, including film, tells us something about a culture's soul. Its strengths and its weaknesses. Kubrick's movies embody both. Each of his films is like a clean, finely cut diamond. He was a master craftsman and a perfectionist for detail. But while the intelligence behind his movies is brilliant, it's also cold. If you're looking for warmth or heart or hope, Kubrick's not your man. You can consume his work all day long and still feel like you somehow lost weight.

Here's the point: Anything without heart, anything without love — and I mean politics, music, film, law, art, even religion — *anything* without love, no matter how brilliant, is finally inadequate and weak. At the end of the day, the human soul yearns for the "real deal," and it won't settle for anything less. "Our hearts are restless Lord, until they rest in thee." Augustine wrote that as one of the great civilizations in history was coming apart at the seams. And he didn't write it in fear — but in confidence, in faith and in love.

Some of you are too young to have experienced the Cold War, but I can remember the air raid drills and how frightening and invincible the Soviet Union seemed in 1959. And I also remember how quickly the whole East bloc collapsed in 1989 — the whole huge facade caving in, because, at the end, it was just another dead clay pagan idol, and history is littered with them. That's the nature of evil. A Peruvian friend of mine once described the Devil as the greatest tactician in history. And also the worst strategist. He's a master in battle — but he's already lost the war and refuses to admit it. Evil is weak. Anything without God is weak, in the exactly same way that the strongest oak will die when it's cut off from water. The only strength the Devil has is persuading us that we're losers too: that we're not worthy of love; that God doesn't care about us; that God is angry with us and we don't need Him anyway . . . one lie after another until we give up and turn our backs on salvation.

Of course, we're *not* losers, and God *does* love us infinitely. He loves us so deeply that He sent His only Son to live and die and rise again for us. So the final item in our reflection tonight is understanding what we need to do to respond to God's love. If we know our mission. and if we know the human terrain where our mission must be lived out — then how do we accomplish the work Christ sets before us?

The first step is to wake *ourselves* up, shake off the hallucination, recover our perspective about right and wrong — and look around. We do this by praying. Pray every day. It sounds simple, but try it for a month: It takes some effort. But it's worth it. Praying, no matter how unfocused at first, clears the head and the heart. It also clears the ears, so we can hear God better. Setting aside some silent time with God each day plants the first seed of sanity. It sends down deep roots, and the soul grows a little stronger every day. If we listen well enough and long enough, God will tell us what He wants.

Second, get to confession regularly and stay close to the Eucharist. You can't lose hope when you know you're forgiven. You can't starve to death when you're being fed by the Bread of Life. And the stronger you get in the Lord, the more you have to give to others. The sacraments are literally rivers of grace. They bring new life. They have real power.

Third, share Jesus Christ consciously with someone everyday. Make a deliberate point of it. You don't have to bat people over the head with the Bible to do this. Life naturally presents us with opportunities to talk about our faith with friends or colleagues. If we're embarrassed, that's just the Devil telling us we're losers and no one would ever listen to us . . . but we already know he's a liar. Nothing is more attractive than a sincere, personal witness to the truth. And remember that what we give away, we get back a hundredfold.

Fourth, have a little courage. In the same Scripture passage where Jesus tells us to go make disciples of all nations, He also tells us that He'll be with us always, even to the end of the age. If that's so — and it is so — what are we really worrying about? What better friend could we have in the battle?

You know, sport can be a great metaphor for the spiritual life. Both involve a kind of combat. Vince Lombardi — who I think was always a man of real faith — said some things that apply as well to disciples, as they did to football players. He said, "It's not whether you get knocked down; it's whether you get up." He said, "Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile." And he also said, "The real glory is being knocked to your knees and then coming back. That's real glory. That's the essence of it."

Finally, be faithful to those who love you . . . and to those whom God has called you to love. If you are, sooner or later you'll begin to notice that the cup overflows, and you have plenty left over for others. So often we overlook the simple and obvious fabric of our daily life. But that's where love begins. That's where our discipleship starts. It's the altar and the cross for each of us. It's why Augustine wrote that "to be faithful in little things is a big thing."

I said earlier that God made each of us to make a difference. Whether we appear to succeed or appear to fail is not the point. In our lifetime, we may not see how God uses us to achieve His will. It's enough that we try, and then profound things can happen. Some of you may remember the name of Dag Hammarskjöld. He was secretary general of the United Nations back during the Congo crisis in the early 1960s. He was also a devout Christian. Hammarskjöld died when his plane crashed on a peace mission in Africa in September 1961. After his death, his diary was found and published under the title, *Markings*. This is a prayer he wrote in his diary shortly before his death:

Have mercy
Upon us.
Have mercy
Upon our efforts,
That we
Before Thee
In love and in faith
Righteousness and humility,
May follow Thee,
With self-denial, steadfastness and courage,
And meet Thee
In the silence.

Give us
A pure heart
That we may see Thee,
A humble heart
That we may hear Thee,
A heart of love
That we may serve Thee,
A heart of faith
That we may live Thee,

Thou
Whom I do not know
But Whose I am.
Thou
Whom I do not comprehend
But Who hast dedicated me
To my fate.
Thou —

We live at the end of a era wounded by sadness and cynicism — but also ennobled by men like this. And now we get to choose which path to follow, because while Jesus calls each of us by name, we have the freedom to say yes or no.

If we really want to preach the Gospel and defend the faith in the years which lie ahead, the only apologetic which will work is to speak the truth in love, through the witness of our lives. And it's always been so. This is why Francis of Assisi 800 years ago and Mother Teresa in this century had exactly the same prayer: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."

God grant us the courage to speak and to live these same words.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace, now and always.

Thank you.