



## ‘Come to me: Be with me’

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The topic for our reflection this afternoon is “Come to me: Be with me,” and as I was pulling together my thoughts for today, I asked a married friend what he thought I should say. He said, “Relationships have consequences.”

I asked him what he meant. He just grinned and began counting off four kids, two car loans, a mortgage, property tax, medical bills, grocery bills, dental bills, tuition bills, heating bills, clothing bills – all of it traceable to a day in 1970 when he told a young woman he wanted to marry her and *be with her* for the rest of their lives.

Relationships have consequences. My friend is very happily married, by the way, and has been for 30 years. But my point is that every relationship has its seasons of joy and sorrow, suffering and happiness. The easy and the difficult are part of the same package. They can’t be separated. Our choices matter because every choice we make shapes us. Every choice we make is the seed of a certain kind of future that includes some possibilities and excludes others. In choosing a spouse, a man and a woman say yes to one direction in life — and no to others.

The same applies to our relationship with God. It has consequences. Christian faith isn’t just a set of ideas or moral principles. It’s an encounter with a living person, Jesus Christ. We meet Him in Scripture, in each other, and most intimately in the Eucharist. And when we enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ, it has consequences — *very big* consequences.

Jesus Christ is alive — here, today, now. He lives tangibly — flesh and blood — in the Communion we receive. That’s why, following the lead of Scripture, we call Jesus “Emmanuel” — the Hebrew word for “God with us.” The Eucharist is our bread of life. It’s more than a symbol, more than a community meal, more than a sign of our unity. It’s all of those things, but much more than those things. The Eucharist is not “like” the flesh and blood of God, or a “reminder” of the flesh and blood of God. In Latin, *Corpus Christi* means, “the body of Christ.” The Eucharist *is the flesh and blood of Jesus, who is the flesh and blood of God* — and in the Eucharist, Jesus is saying to each of us today, “Come to me: Be with me.”

We all like to be with Jesus at times like the Transfiguration, with sun rays streaming through the clouds and glory shining in the Lord’s face. That’s the easy part. Peter, James and John liked that part so much they wanted to set up tents and stay on the mountain. But Jesus led them back down into the world, and that’s where the story gets difficult. Not many of us want to be in Gethsemane when Jesus asks us to pray with Him awhile. Not many of us want to stay around when He asks us: *Be with me*, among the lepers and the paralytics. *Be with me*, when I stand before Pilate. *Be with me*, when I hang on the cross.

Let me give you a few statistics. We have 63 million Catholics in this country. Somewhere between 50 million and 80 million Americans claim they've been "born again." Ninety-six percent of Americans believe in God; 90 percent pray; 93 percent of American homes have a Bible; 87 percent of Americans describe themselves as Christian; and more than 40 percent of Americans attend church weekly — which, on the surface, makes the United States seem like one of the most religiously active countries in the world. Americans spend \$4 billion dollars a year on CDs, books and bumper stickers honoring Jesus Christ.

But if that's true — if we Americans are so seemingly religious — then why is it that more than half of all Americans can't name the authors of the Four Gospels; 63 percent of us don't know what a Gospel is; 58 percent can't name five of the Ten Commandments; and 10 percent believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.

Why is it that pornography is a multibillion dollar industry in our country? Why are a million unborn babies aborted each year? Why are hundreds of thousands of families locked below the poverty line; why are 200 million guns in circulation; and why do we live in one of the most violent cultures in the world?

A man can say he loves his wife, but he proves it *by his actions*. Men and women can say they love God, but they prove it *by their actions*. Relationships have *consequences*, or they're not real. Jesus tells us, "*I am the bread of life*"; "*I am the light of the world*"; "*I am the way, the truth and the life*"; "*No one comes to the Father except through me*"; "*Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*." In saying these things, Jesus invites us into a relationship of love, and being in love with Jesus Christ means being with Him all the way — from the silence we share with Him at Communion, to the work we share with Him in the sanctification of the world.

We need to understand that the Catholic faith is personal — *intensely* personal — because each of us is unique and unrepeatable, and God loves each of us uniquely and infinitely. But "personal" is not the same thing as "private." Our faith is *never* private; it always has social implications. The Eucharist is not a pious retreat into the self. Our relationship with Jesus Christ begins and ends with a call to discipleship.

And discipleship has a cost. The German Lutheran martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once said that "cheap grace . . . grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate . . . is the deadly enemy of [the] Church." He meant that comfortable faith, *easy* faith, is false faith. Relationships have consequences.

Hearing the Gospel isn't enough. Talking about our faith isn't enough. We have to *do something* about it. Each of us, in a personal way, needs to become what the Early Church called Mary — a kind of *theotokos*, a "God-bearer." The seed of faith has to bear fruit in a life of Christian action, a life of personal Christian *witness*, or it's just words — and talk is cheap.

That's why today's Corpus Christi celebration is so important. The body of Christ is the bread of life and the food of the Church. The Eucharist is *our* food as a believing people — it's meant to nourish and strengthen us in bringing others to new life in Jesus Christ.

God doesn't need "anonymous" Christians, Christians who blend in, Christians who don't make waves. When Jesus told us, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19), He gave us a missionary mandate to convert the world — and He meant you and me, today, right now . . . not somebody else, tomorrow.

We're here to rock the boat. That's what it means to be leaven. The Epistle of James says that faith without works is a dead faith. John Paul II says the same thing with a slightly different twist: Faith which does not *become culture* is dead faith. By "culture" he means the entire environment of our lives. Our culture reflects who we are and what we value. If we really believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, it should be obvious in our families, our work, our laws, our music, art, architecture — everything. If we really had 63 million *alive, believing, dedicated* Catholics in the United States, the whole world would be different.

Faith should impregnate everything we do. It should bear fruit every day in beauty and new life. And that's why God doesn't need "nice" Christians, Christians who are personally opposed to sin, but too polite to do anything about it publicly. Mother Teresa was a good and holy woman . . . but she wasn't necessarily "nice." Real discipleship should be loving and generous, just and merciful, honest and wise – but also tough and zealous . . . and determined to turn the world toward Christ.

If God wants us to be His cooperators in transforming the world, *it's because the world needs conversion*. The world is good because God created it. But the world is also sinful, because we've freely made it that way by our sinful choices and actions

We need to understand the world as it *really is*, the way Vatican II described it in *Gaudium et Spes*, the great *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. *Gaudium et Spes* saw the world as a pattern of light and shadow, good and evil. That means we need to be *actively involved* in the world, for the sake of the world. We need to love the world as it needs to be loved – affirming its accomplishments, and redeeming its mistakes.

Listen to these opening lines from *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in [the] hearts" of the disciples of Jesus — and this is "why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history" (1). And later in the same text, listen to these words: ". . . Christians can yearn for nothing more ardently than to serve the men of this age with an ever-growing generosity and success" (93).

*Gaudium et Spes* offers us an "examination of conscience" we can apply to just about every aspect of our lives — our personal choices, our parishes, our business activity, our political leaders, everything. For example:

*Do we reverence and defend* the dignity of the human person from conception to natural death?

*Do we really love* our enemies? Do we even try?

*Do we teach our children to take responsibility for society*, and to participate in building up the common good? Do we teach that by our own good example?

*Do we preach, by our actions, the dignity of human labor* and the value of human activity? Do we live our lives with a purpose — the purpose of co-creating with God a truly *human* world, a world shaped by the Gospel, a "new heaven and new earth"?

*Do we promote the nobility of marriage* and the sanctity of the family?

*Do we work to ensure that our art*, science, technology, music, law, entertainment media — all the elements of our culture — advance the real dignity of women and men?

*Do we practice justice* in our own social and economic relationships? Do we really try to root out the prejudices in our own hearts? And do we encourage justice in our friends, business associates and leaders?

*Do we take an active hand in the political process?* Do we demand that our officials promote the sanctity of the human person? And do we do *everything in our power* to correct or replace them if they don't?

*Finally, do we create in ourselves* and in our children a sense of international community? The word "Catholic" means universal. We live most of our lives in our families and parishes — and that's where our first priorities should always lie. But there's no such thing as a "parochial" Catholic. We're *all* internationalists. That's why issues like hunger, economic development, the rights of migrant workers, religious persecution — even when they're happening on the other side of the world, they're happening to our brothers and sisters in the Lord. And so they involve us.

As Christians *in the world*, we have a sacred responsibility *to the world* – to be in the world as agents of the Gospel. We think too little of ourselves when we assume that we were made for nothing better than the “present arrangement” of things. We should never be slaves to the status quo. God put us here to be agents of change. Woody Allen once said that “80 percent of life is just showing up.” He sounds funny — but he’s wrong. That’s a life 80 percent wasted, because there’s so much need in the world crying out to be heard.

There’s a Ghanaian proverb that goes like this: “God swats the flies of the cow with no tail.” It means that God takes care of the poor, because the poor don’t have the power to take care of themselves. That’s why Christians have a “preferential option for the poor.” If God loves and serves the poor, *then how can we do anything else?* And if that requires political action, so be it.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, “I’m puzzled about which Bible people are reading when they suggest that religion and politics don’t mix.” And the great Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, once said that, “To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the world.” And Vatican II never said, and never meant, that Christians should let the world go to hell because of some mistaken idea of good manners.

The *Letter to Diognetus*, which was written in the Second Century, says that “. . . the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all cities of the world, but cannot be identified with the world. . . . They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. . . . It is by the soul, enclosed within the body, that the body is held together, and similarly it is by Christians, detained in the world as in a prison, that the world is held together.”

This is what the Gospel of John means in Chapter 17, verses 14-19. Jesus prays for a Church in, but not of, the world. He prays *not* that we be taken out of the world, but that we be guarded from the power of the world. We are to be distinct and recognizable as disciples of Christ.

Scripture calls Satan the “Father of Lies” for a reason. We need to get it into our heads *that the Gospel is the real world*, but again and again in daily life we hear that Christians are old-fashioned, or irrelevant, or inflexible or unrealistic. These are all lies. An interviewer once asked Mother Teresa, “Why are you so holy?” She answered, “You sound as if holiness is abnormal. To be holy is normal. To be anything else is abnormal.”

C.S. Lewis once wrote that “heaven is an acquired taste” — but only because we’ve addicted ourselves to sin and its delusions. What some people call “the real world” is usually just the configuration of all those forces which are organized against God. *This is not the real world* – but the devil wants us to think it is. The devil wants us to believe that the Gospel view is an idealistic dream. That’s insidious, because it traps us in the status quo of those “powers and principalities” who have the world in a death grip. So we constantly need to ask ourselves: Are we accommodated Christians? Are we too comfortable? Have we assimilated too well? Socrates warned that we should be wary when people praise us. As Christians, we should be worried when nobody wants to persecute us.

*Gaudium et Spes* tells us that only through Jesus Christ can men and women find eternal life (10). Where do we find Jesus Christ? We begin in the Eucharist and Scripture, and we follow Him to the suffering and wounded.

In *The Odyssey (Book XIX)*, when Odysseus finally returns home to Ithaca after years of wandering, he disguises himself as an old man. Not even his wife or son recognizes him. That night, just before bed, the aged nurse who cared for Odysseus in his youth bathes him. . . . and she recognizes a scar on his leg. She couldn’t recognize him until she saw his scar.

When you go home tonight, read the Gospel of John, Chapter 20, verses 19-31. The Risen Christ appears to His frightened disciples, and they recognize Him in seeing His scars. The Risen Christ *has scars*. So if you want to see the Risen Christ today, begin by looking for Him in the people who have His scars – the homeless person, the AIDS patient, the mentally handicapped child. The First Letter of Peter says, “By His wounds you have been healed” (2:24). The suffering among us are not some kind of embarrassing mistake. They’re Christ’s invitation to each of us to *really live*, to *really believe* – to be *with Him*, by serving *them*.

Our commitment to *be with Christ* among those who suffer reminds us of one other important thing. Justice needs to be at the heart of all our relationships and all of our evangelization efforts. Chief Dan George once said that, "When the white man came, we had the land and they had the Bibles. Now they have the land, and we have the Bibles." We can't have a living relationship with Jesus Christ without rooting our lives in justice. The Eucharist is the sacrament of Christ's presence — not only in our hearts, but also in our daily lives and especially in our treatment of others.

Our job is to bring Jesus Christ to the world, and the world to Jesus Christ. But how can a few simple people like us convert the world? Mary and the Apostles asked the same question. They changed the world by letting Jesus Christ live and work through them. We don't need to be afraid. We need to be confident in the promise made by Christ Himself: "I am with you always, to the close of the age."

Don't be afraid of the world. The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley once sneered that "I could believe in Christ if He did not drag along behind Him that leprous bride of His, the Church." But Shelley's long gone, isn't he . . . and the Church is still here, still bringing life to the world.

Don't be afraid of the world. Charles Spurgeon once said, "The way you defend the Bible is the same way you defend a lion. You just let it loose." So much of the world is already dead without knowing it — and that's *exactly* why people respond to the truth when they hear it. Robert Farrar Capon wrote that, "Jesus came to raise the dead. The only qualification for the gift of the Gospel is to be dead. You don't have to be smart. You don't have to be good. You don't have to be wise. You don't have to be wonderful. You just have to be dead. That's it."

Understand the purpose of your life. When you leave here today, you're going out into a struggle for the soul of the world. That's how the Holy Father describes it. That's your vocation. *Nothing* is more important than that work. C.S. Lewis once said that "Christianity, if false, is of no importance; and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."

Corpus Christi is the feast of Christ's living, permanent, sacramental presence among us. And just as He strengthened and encouraged the first Apostles, so too He will strengthen and encourage each of us — *if we let Him*. The age of miracles — the age of faith — is not over. It's just beginning. It begins today in each of you.

We become who we really are — we experience reality most vividly — when we allow Christ to mingle His flesh and blood with ours; when we allow the bread of life to transform us, and to work through us to renew the face of the earth. Each of us is called to share in God's creative and procreative power to give life. That's the meaning of the prayer we all learned as children:

*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and enkindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and we will be created, and You will renew the face of the earth.*

Relationships have consequences. Jesus loved us enough to *die* for us. Surely we can love Him enough to *live* for Him — and be His witnesses to others.

*Thanks, and God bless you.*