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Addresses

Act on your faith; go and convert the world

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Somebody from the Bauhaus school of architecture - it was Gropius or Mies van der Rohe - once said that "less is more." He was talking about the design of buildings, and it may or may not be true about architecture. But it's a good principle for a lot of other things in life. And it applies in a special way to speakers who begin their remarks after 9 p.m. So I promise to be brief.

I'm here for two reasons tonight, and the Threshold Award, of course, is one of them. I'm very grateful for the honor. It's a gracious and generous gift. In fact it's too gracious, because others deserve it more. But I'm really here for another reason; the same reason you are: to encourage and support Youth for the Third Millennium. A lot of people *talk* about their faith. YTM does something about it. That's what sets it apart. That's what makes it fruitful. YTM is about being and making young Catholic missionaries - and the missionary vocation is what God inscribes in the soul of every Christian through baptism. So it's worth reflecting on for a few moments.

When you go home this evening, I'd like you to reread the Epistle of James. It'll take you 10 minutes. It's simple, frank and straight to the point. James urges us to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (1:22). He reminds us that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:14). In other words, personal faith needs to have practical, public consequences - or it's just a collection of sentimental pieties. Reread the Gospel of Matthew 28:19, where Jesus says, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you . . ."

That's our mission statement: *Act on your faith. Go and convert the world.* Jesus didn't say, "Go and engage in an interesting dialogue." He didn't say, "Go and be polite to all nations, making sure not to overstate your views." Jesus wasn't an ecclesial politician, and everything about His message had gravity and urgency. And it still does. And I think we often try too hard to tame that.

In fact, if I had a single, basic observation about the way we've lived as American Catholics for the last 40 years, it's this: We've been too polite and too timid. We haven't been the leaven Jesus commanded us to be, and now we're paying the price for it with a culture that grows more estranged from the Gospel with every passing year. Obviously, dialogue with the world is a good thing. Courtesy and respect for the human person are always *essential* things. But they never excuse us from the main work of our vocation: to bring Jesus Christ to the world, and the world to Jesus Christ.

"Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations . . ." When He said that, Jesus was talking to you and me. How well have we listened to Him? What have we done about it? What are we doing about it today — in our families, in our friendships, in our business dealings, in our political choices? Think about the election we all face next month. It's a big one. A lot of judicial appointments ride on the outcome. So how are we going to bring our Catholic identity and our Catholic convictions into the voting booth? It's a vital question. Because if our faith doesn't guide us in critical places like the voting booth, then we're already on our way to losing that faith. And here's a simple example. Exactly 40 years ago this fall, candidate John Kennedy promised a group of Protestant ministers in

Houston that he wouldn't let his Catholic faith interfere with his service as president, if he got elected. And he was elected . . . and he kept his word.

Looking back, I believe this was one of the watersheds of modern public life in our country. Without ever intending it, Kennedy created a model of Church/state relations which seemed to work on the surface, but was really a blueprint for accommodation. And that model helped to shape a whole generation of Catholic officeholders . . . too many of whom found a way to live quite comfortably with the chasm that opened up between their private religious convictions and their public service. Of course, the cost can be very high. Pragmatism in public life usually has a louder voice than private conscience, and pretty soon "private conscience" can shrivel away into not much more than private opinion. And opinions are a dime a dozen.

So what's the result? Four decades after John Kennedy, too many American Catholics - in fact, maybe most — no longer connect their political choices with their religious faith in any consistent way. The "Catholic vote," as a meaningful bloc, probably doesn't exist anymore. And a prolife Democrat like the late Governor Bob Casey - who was Irish and Catholic, just like John Kennedy - finds himself barred from speaking at his own party's convention in 1992, and ignored by his party's leadership until his death.

That's the legacy of too easily accommodating our Catholic faith to politics . . . instead of forming and informing our politics through our faith. Forty years after John Kennedy — despite all the exhilaration and joy so many of us felt at his election — it's impossible for a Catholic who is publicly loyal to the Church on "sanctity-of-human-life" issues to hold any national leadership position in John Kennedy's own party.

My point is not that Democrats are bad, and Republicans are good — or vice versa.

My point is that St. Paul's words, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16), apply to all of us, every single day, in all our choices. St. Paul wasn't afraid of an angry God who would punish him for not preaching Jesus Christ. That's not the kind of "woe" he was worried about. Paul was afraid of losing the treasure he had. Paul understood that if we don't act on our faith and share it, we lose it. We have to give it to others to nourish it in our own hearts. The joy of Jesus Christ is in living Him and sharing Him. That's why the Christian faith is *always* personal but *never* private. It always has social consequences - and that means cultural and political consequences. Democracy thrives on those consequences. God is good for democracy. Religious faith creates and sustains good citizenship. So whenever you hear that tired old argument that Catholics shouldn't "impose their views" on society, it's time to hit the bamboozle alarm — because that argument is almost always advanced by people who have every intention of imposing *their own* views on society.

And frankly, that shouldn't surprise anyone. In a sense, that's what all laws and all public policies involve: the "imposition" of one set of moral convictions on the culture at large. The trouble is that some laws, and the convictions which undergird them, are good. Some are bad. Some are inhuman. The purpose of the democratic process is to winnow out the good ideas from the bad ones; in other words, to allow — in fact, to encourage — people of strong moral convictions to disagree with one another vigorously . . . and to pursue their convictions into law by every peaceful, ethical means at their disposal.

When Catholic officials use "pluralism" as an excuse for their inaction on abortion, for example, they misread what real pluralism is. In fact, that sort of Catholic self-censorship, *especially* in elected officials but in individual voters as well, undermines real democracy and can very quickly become a kind of opportunism or even cowardice.

All of us who are baptized are meant to be missionaries — in ways appropriate to our vocations, but with no exceptions. Vatican II reminded us that the Church "is the universal sacrament of salvation" (LG, 48); that we each share "the obligation of spreading the faith" (AG, 23) and that "the whole Church is missionary and the work of evangelization [is] the fundamental task of the people of God" (AG, 35).

So we either preach Jesus Christ in our words and actions - or we lose Him. From tonight forward, all of us need to remember that we're living in a Jubilee Year - a time to re-anchor our hearts in God and to renew our vocation as apostles. In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul II reminds us that all Christians are involved in "a struggle for the soul of the contemporary world." In every dimension of our lives — from our families, to our jobs, to the solitude of the voting booth — God

asks us to be His witnesses, His missionaries. So we need to begin to *actively live* those words from Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations . . ." And I mean not just agree with them, *but live and witness them*.

You know, as a bishop, I never really get tired of strangers knocking on the door of my home to talk about Jesus. But I do get a little puzzled that very few of them are ever Catholic. Over the years, I've had Mormons, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, evangelicals - but very few Catholic missionaries. That's sad and odd, and it needs to change, especially in this Jubilee Year.

But that emphasis on the missionary vocation is also what makes Youth for the Third Millennium such an important apostolate right now for the whole Church. YTM, and groups like it, offer a model for all of us. Catholics need to witness to each other. We need to learn again how to be missionaries. Even bishops need to hear the word of God. Even bishops need revival — and some of them, like me, need a really big jolt of it. So take heart in the work we celebrate tonight. YTM is fruitful. And it will grow even more fruitful with your prayers and support. When Catholics hear God's word, and then *do* God's word by bringing Jesus Christ to others . . . then the world will begin to change, one life, one family, one parish at a time. And *that* will be a real revolution. A revolution of love — which creates a "civilization of love."

I want to share just one more thought with you before I close.

Many years ago, in seminary Latin class, I read some of the work by a Roman poet called Marcus Valerius Martialis. We know him today as Martial, and we remember him mainly for his epigrams — little poems which he would end with a sardonic "sting" in the last line. In one of those poems, Martial wrote that the reason why a wall divides the arena from the audience in the Colosseum . . . is to protect the animals from the beasts.

I thought about that poem earlier this month when I was in Rome for the international jubilee of bishops. Rome is a city built on the bones of martyrs. The saint whose memorial we celebrate today - Ignatius of Antioch - was one of the great bishops of the early Church. Martial and St. Ignatius were contemporaries — and Ignatius died in Rome, killed by wild animals, in the same arena Martial described.

Ignatius died in A.D. 107, under the Emperor Trajan. For those of you who remember your history, Trajan ruled the empire at the height of its size, prosperity and military power, with all of its enemies defeated, and peace throughout the Mediterranean. In other words, Ignatius went to his death with absolutely no hope that the Gospel would ever triumph, or even survive. No hope, that is, except his trust in the presence of Christ and the promise of Christ in Matthew 28:20 - "I am with you always, to the close of the age."

Here's the point. Discipleship has a cost, a *personal* cost, and it can be heavy. When the Holy Father tells us that we're involved in "a struggle for the soul of the contemporary world," he means that evil hates the Gospel. And those who preach Jesus Christ will be ridiculed and persecuted, and even sometimes killed.

Is it worth it? We all get to decide that for ourselves, and our lives will reflect the choices we make. But the city that murdered Ignatius 19 centuries ago, today celebrated his Memorial Mass in hundreds of churches.

Listen to these words from today's Entrance Antiphon:

With Christ I am nailed to the cross. I live now not with my own life, but Christ lives within me. I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and sacrificed Himself for me (Gal 2:19-20).

And these words from the Opening Prayer of today's Mass:

*All-Powerful and Ever-Living God,
you ennoble your Church
with the heroic witness of all
who give their lives for Christ.
Grant that the victory of St. Ignatius of Antioch
may bring us your constant help,
as it brought him eternal glory.*

Is it worth it? I think we all know the answer to that one.

God grant us the courage to support and love each other in His name; to hope in His promises; to believe in His word; to be faithful to His Church; to preach the Gospel with our words and with our lives . . . and to bring all things to renewal in Jesus Christ, His son.

God bless you all.