



## 'Our labor in the Lord is not in vain'

November 11, 2002

*Below is the text from an address to the fall banquet of Emmaus Ministries in Chicago. Emmaus Ministries is a joint Catholic-Protestant ministry to help men involved in sexual exploitation to change their lives.*

I have a friend in her middle years by the name of Therese. Therese works as a writer and editor. Her husband teaches in a Catholic high school. Ten years ago, Therese gave birth to her fourth child. She named her son Andy. And within a couple of weeks it became clear that Andy had -- and would always have -- Down syndrome.

Most of us know that Down syndrome is a genetic disease. Most of us know that people with Down syndrome are mentally disabled; that a lot of other health problems go along with their condition; and that their disability can't be fixed or cured. But many of us, I think, don't really like to dwell too long on the sick and disabled because we don't know what to do about them. Their burdens make us uneasy. All of us are imperfect, but persons with a handicap like Down syndrome can't hide it. They have the flaw built right into their blueprint, right into their chromosomes. Which is why the most common "treatment" doctors prescribe for unborn children with this disease is abortion.

My friend once told me that loving Andy isn't the hard part. In fact, loving Andy is very easy, and caring for him comes along naturally with the love, so the family just adjusts to Andy's problems and moves on with daily life.

But what's hard sometimes is loving God. What's hard sometimes is trusting that Andy's life has a meaning; that his life isn't a mistake; that his burdens aren't a punishment for his parents' past sins, or a really cruel joke.

Therese and her husband have built their careers on the ability to communicate well. That's what they do for a living. But at 10, Andy still has trouble speaking very simple sentences. Half the time, they can't understand a word he says. So at night, in the dark, what his parents worry about is: Will Andy ever have a job? Will he ever be able to live on his own? And who will protect him and love him when they're gone?

I wanted to begin tonight with the example of Andy and his parents because our theme for this evening is "Our labor in the Lord is not in vain." And that isn't always obvious, is it. Too often our labor does seem to be in vain. Religion is easy when the sun's out. But we find out who we really are when our child has an extra chromosome, or our spouse leaves us for somebody at work, or everything we do to get a young man off the streets and out of prostitution seems to have no effect at all. We find out what we really believe when we ask, "Is our labor in vain?," and God seems to be silent -- and in His silence, He makes us choose the answer for ourselves.

Sooner or later in every life, people come to a fork in the road. And when the road splits, it leads to two very different destinations -- two opposite explanations of what life means. Augustine talked about the City of God and the City of Man. John Bunyan wrote about the Celestial City and the City of Destruction. But each of us, at some point, comes to a similar place of testing or crisis where we face the same choice between yearning and struggling for the good we can't see -- or settling for the satisfactions we can see, here and now.

We become what we choose. That was true when Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress* more than 300 years ago, and it's equally true today. But when Bunyan talked about the luxuries and comforts of the town he called "Vanity," and all the marvels of the wonderful Fair within it, he was inventing the place as part of his story. He was imagining Vanity Fair as a trap for his pilgrim. Today I sometimes wonder if we're living in the middle of that trap.

Like all of us here tonight, I love my country. I believe that America is a great nation, Americans are a good people, and I think this was reaffirmed in some of the election results on Tuesday. At its best, our country remains a great experiment in human dignity. But the experiment depends on certain assumptions -- and the first assumption among them is the sanctity of the human person.

"Sanctity" is an idea that makes no sense without God. And the more we remove God from our public life, the more we undermine the moral vocabulary that gives our public institutions meaning. The more secular we become, the more we aggravate four key problems that are killing us as a community.

Here's the first problem: our inability to think clearly. Reasoning requires time. It demands a reverence for ideas, and the testing and comparison of arguments. But the America we have today is a culture built on marketing -- and marketing works in exactly the opposite way.

Marketing appeals to our appetites. It depends on suppressing our critical thought, because people who think clearly and carefully may not buy the product or believe the message. That explains why marketing is tied so tightly to images. Images operate underneath the radar of our critical thought. And that's also why car dealers usually put an attractive young woman in front of their latest sports car, rather than a stack of performance statistics.

This is a serious issue. The average American child watches more than 500,000 television commercials between the ages of 3 and 18. That's up to 9,000 hours of advertising, not including radio and magazines, and it amounts to a university education in greed, self-absorption and impossible expectations. In the name of serving consumers, we've permanently addicted consumers to a river of new goods and services. We now have millions of people who live artificially restless and dissatisfied lives -- and our economy depends on keeping them that way.

Calvin Coolidge once described advertising as "the method by which the desire is created for better things" -- whether people need them or not. And so we buy more things and go deeper into debt, and then work harder to buy more things and service a bigger debt. This has huge consequences for the interior life of individuals, marriages, families and all of our institutions. We don't allow ourselves to think through the logic of our own economic machinery, because we don't want to deal with the burdens of reforming the way we live.

Here's the second problem: our inability to remember. Americans have a fascination with the new. We're a people of the "now." We enjoy nostalgia as a kind of entertainment. But we don't really like history because the past -- as it really happened -- burdens us with memories and unfinished business. It imposes obligations on the present. Americans like to think that we can invent and reinvent ourselves. But the cost of that illusion is that we tend to have a very poor grasp of history. We learn too little from the lessons of the past, and sometimes too late, and that includes the lessons of Scripture.

Here's problem three: our inability to imagine and hope. Americans have never been an ideological people. We're practical and flexible. We're toolmakers. We believe in results. So it's really no surprise that we have the strongest economic machine in the world; or that we excel at science and technology; or that these disciplines enjoy such esteem in our culture.

But technology always carries with it a "revenge of unintended consequences." And one of the unintended consequences of our science is that we've become its objects and its victims. The price tag for our science has been a decline in our understanding of the soul, a rise in a materialist view of the world, and an erosion in our sense that humanity is somehow unique in creation. Hope and imagination flow out of a belief in a higher purpose to our lives. If all we are is very intelligent carbon -- well, then hope and imagination are just quirks of the species. And so is any talk about the sanctity of the human person.

Here's problem four: our inability to recognize and live real freedom. Freedom is not just an endless supply of choices. Choice for its own sake is just another form of idolatry, and tolerating evil choices is not a virtue. It's not an acceptable choice to kill an unborn child, no matter what the genetic problems. It's not an acceptable choice for men and women made in the image of God to prostitute

themselves on the street. These choices debase not just the individual person, but also the society that tolerates the behavior.

Freedom is the ability to see -- and the courage to do -- what is right. But if Americans stop believing that absolute principles of right and wrong exist, then how can we even begin to discuss things like freedom, truth and the dignity of the human person, in a common vocabulary? How can we ever agree on which rights take precedence in the public square, or who has responsibility for what?

What we get in place of freedom is a kind of anarchy of conflicting pressure groups and personal agendas. These are held together by just one fragile thing: the economy we all share . . . and that's never the basis of a community. In fact our economy, more than anything else in American life, teaches us to see almost everything as a commodity to be bought or sold.

This is what Jeremy Rifkin means when he describes American culture as more and more a "paid-for experience" based on the commodification of passion, ideals, relationships and even time. If we want freedom, we buy it by purchasing this car or that computer. If we want romance, we buy it by purchasing this cruise or that hotel package.

And this can lead to some very strange products. On Sunday, as I was pulling my thoughts together for tonight, I came across a story in the Denver Post with the headline, "Loved ones can shine for eternity." For prices starting at about \$4,000, a company called Life Gems will now harvest the carbon from the cremated remains of your loved ones and press them into blue, yellow or red diamonds -- and of course, cut and polish them to order.

This isn't a joke. The Life Gems web site already logs about 45,000 hits a day. The company founder said his product is "about celebrating the life of a loved one," whether human or pet. He added that, "this is about a new beginning and a new way to keep the memory of a lost one near and dear." Of course, no matter how hard I try; I can't quite imagine anyone's parents as matching cufflinks -- or why anyone would want to remember them that way.

We become what we choose. Jesus told us that what we really treasure, that's where we put our hearts. And too much of daily life in America in 2002 involves treasuring the wrong things. The more our advertising misuses the language of our dreams and ideals to sell consumer goods, to flatter our appetites and to disguise our responsibilities to the suffering and the poor . . . the more mixed up our dreams and ideals become. We confuse ourselves to the point where we no longer recognize what real love, honest work, freedom, friendship, compassion, family, community, patriotism -- and the meaning of life itself -- look like.

We create a void in our hearts that we try harder and harder to fill with material things, which never really do fill that emptiness. The more we have, the more we fear losing what we have. And this leads us deeper and deeper into futility, no matter how much we own or how frantically we try to distract ourselves.

In the First Reading from Scripture at Mass today, St. Paul urged the Philippians not to set themselves "upon the things of this world," but instead to remember "that we have our citizenship in heaven." And in the same Mass, Psalm 122 said "I rejoiced when I heard them say: Let us go to the house of the Lord." Vanity Fair never satisfies the heart. It never could and it never will, because we're more than obedient consumers. We're more than economic units with appetites. We were made for something better. We were made for a different home.

The road to that home leads in a different direction -- and for all of us, sooner or later, it involves suffering. After Pope John Paul II recovered from the bullet wounds of an assassination attempt in 1981, he wrote a wonderful meditation, and in it, he called the Bible "God's great book about suffering."

We all fear suffering. Nobody in his right mind looks for unnecessary suffering -- but when it comes to us, and when we bear it patiently and give it over as a glory to God, then suffering becomes an act of creation and freedom. Then it joins us to Christ's suffering in His redemption of the world. And that's what the great Jewish Christian writer Leon Bloy meant when he wrote that, "man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence." Suffering is the chisel God uses to hammer us free from the sin and mediocrity and distractions we crust ourselves in.

Christianity is a religion for realists. It's not for the weak – or rather, it's not for people willing to remain weak. The Church calendar reminds us every November to reflect upon the Four Last Things: death, judgment, hell and heaven. Every one of us in this room tonight will experience three of those Four Last Things sooner or later -- and probably sooner than we'd like. In the light of eternity, we have so little time in this world. We need to use it well. We need to make it count. We need to have just a little courage -- the courage to trust God enough to live the Gospel well in our own lives, so that our lives become a witness and a source of hope for others.

C.S. Lewis once said that, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit . . . [and] all day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or another of these destinations" -- eternal life, or its alternative.

Christianity is a religion for realists, because what we do – or don't do -- matters. Not just here and now, but forever. And not just for ourselves, but for every life we influence, and for the world in which we live.

In every marriage, in every family, in every friendship, a moment comes when the person we love says, "If you love me, act like it; if you love me, prove it by your trust." Why would God, the greatest Lover in history, be any different? A reporter once asked Mother Teresa the secret of her success. She answered that she wasn't called to succeed, but only to try. Results were God's business. Success was God's business. Trying was her business. She wasn't called to find big solutions to poverty -- but only to live the little solution of personal love that would become a good infection in the hearts of other people and "something beautiful for God."

This needs to be the spirit of everything Emmaus Ministries does. Don't ever doubt the fruitfulness of your work. You're doing something extraordinary here, something that takes courage and hope, something beautiful for God. If you turn one man to the Lord, that's one man who will see the face of God forever. And so your "labor in the Lord is not in vain," no matter how many disappointments or failures come along with it.

And don't ever underestimate the witness and power of Christians from different traditions working together. The issues of faith that divide us are important, and we should never diminish them -- but we always need to judge them in the context of the love of Jesus Christ we share. We're brothers and sisters in the same Lord, and when we act like it, God can act through us to change the world. Christian unity isn't a structure we can build from the outside. We need to live it from the inside first, through the discipleship we share -- and we can trust that God will handle the rest in His own good time.

I began with a story about my friend Therese, and I want to finish that story as I close.

Catholics have always had a love for the rosary as a special form of prayer. It's a Marian prayer, but it's based on Scripture and moments in the life of Christ and His mother. Last month the Holy Father revised the rosary for the first time in many years to include more reflections on the public ministry of Jesus. So Therese and her husband decided to try to pray one decade of the rosary every night. And their son Andy, the young boy with Down syndrome, sat with them and followed along silently on his own beads.

On the second night, Therese turned to her son. She asked him if he'd like to lead the prayers. And he did -- one syllable at a time, one prayer at a time, for all 10 Hail Marys. She told me that she only understood about half of what Andy said, but he knew what he was saying, and he was enormously proud of saying it -- and in his happiness, she could very clearly understand every syllable of what God was telling her through him: "I am with you always, to the close of the age." So what's the lesson for the rest of us?

Have courage. Have hope. And know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain. It's never in vain. God bless you.