



New Life in Christ: What it looks like, what it demands

Edmonton, Canada, April 30, 2009

I want to begin with a passage from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.¹ It sets the stage for our conversation tonight. Here it is.

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

What makes these verses important? Paul is the greatest missionary the world has ever seen or ever will see. He talks with absolute conviction about Jesus appearing to Cephas and the twelve; to the 500 brethren; and again to James and the apostles. But the pivotal words in this passage -- in fact the pivotal words in Paul's entire life -- come at the very end: *"Last of all, as to one untimely born, he also appeared to me."*

The Catholic faith is not simply a collection of doctrines and ideas, or a body of knowledge or even a system of beliefs, although all those things are important. At its root, Christianity is an experience; a life-changing, personal experience of the Risen Jesus Christ. Everything else in St. Paul, and everything else in our life as Catholics, flows from that personal encounter with Jesus Christ. If we truly seek him, then we will always find him. But *when* we find him, we need to be ready for the consequences, because nothing about our lives can be the same.

Let me share a story with you to explain what I mean. It's about a young man named Franz who lived about 60 years ago in a small village in Austria. Franz was the illegitimate son of a farmer who later died in World War I. He was a wild teenager. Local people recall that he was the first one in his village to drive a motorcycle. And it's not because he drove safely or kept to the posted speed limits.

Franz was the leader of a gang that used to fight rival gangs in neighboring towns with knives and chains. He was something of a cad, too, and a womanizer. He got a girl pregnant and was forced to leave town. People said he went to work for awhile in an iron mine.

For reasons nobody knows, Franz came back a changed man. He had always gone to church, even during his wildest days. But when he returned, he was a serious Catholic, not just a Sunday Catholic. He started making payments to support the child he had fathered out of wedlock. He married a good Catholic woman and settled down to become a good farmer, husband and father, raising three children and serving as a lay leader in his local parish.

I'll tell you the rest of the story later. But I want to quote something Franz wrote in a letter to his godson. He wrote: "I can say from my own experience how painful life often is when one lives as a halfway Christian. It is more like vegetating than living."²

I remembered Franz when I started thinking about tonight's topic: our "New Life in Christ." Believers today are relentlessly tempted to accept a halfway Christianity, to lead a "double life" -- to be one person when we're in church or at prayer and somebody different when we're with our friends or family, or at work, or when we talk about politics.

Part of this temptation comes from normal social pressure. We don't want to stand out. We don't want to seem different, so we keep our religious beliefs to ourselves. It's as if we've internalized the old adage: "Never talk about religion or politics in polite company." I've never accepted that kind of thinking, myself. Religion, politics, social justice - these are precisely the things we *should* be talking about. Nothing else really matters. Few things could be more important than religious faith, which deals with the ultimate meaning of life, and politics, which deals with how we should organize our lives together for justice and the common good.

These are the things we need to talk about tonight if we really want a new life, a *whole and undivided* life, in Jesus Christ. I think it's important, though, that we start with a kind of "diagnosis" of the culture we're living in, and the challenges it forces us to face. The reason is simple. We're living in the first age in human history where entire societies are organized around this principle of "a double life."

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor calls our period the "secular age." How we got to this moment is far too big a subject for us tonight. The point is that in just a few centuries we've gone from living in a world where it was virtually impossible *not* to believe in God, to living in a world where belief in God doesn't seem to be necessary or to make any difference.

Most men and women today can live their whole lives as if God didn't exist. Of course in the West -- and by "the West" I mean all developed, Western-style democracies, not just Canada and the United States -- we're allowed to believe in God, and even to pray and worship together. But we're constantly lectured by the mass media to never "impose" our religious viewpoints on our neighbors. This curious idea is always framed as a very reasonable and enlightened way to live. You're free to believe what you want to believe; I'm free to believe what I want to believe; and the government agrees not to tell either of us what to believe or not to believe.

But things really aren't as reasonable and enlightened as they seem. Here's a recent example: Pope Benedict visited Africa in March. On the plane a reporter asked him about the AIDS epidemic and the Church's disapproval of condom uses. Now, there aren't many nations or organizations in the world today that have poured as much money and human effort into the fight against AIDS in Africa as the Catholic Church. That's just a statistical fact. So when the Pope answers a question like this he's speaking, not just from theological opinion, but with real knowledge about conditions on the ground.

And Benedict said that promoting condom use doesn't help. In fact it does just the opposite. Nobody listened to his answer beyond that point. It was all over the media for the next several days how this conservative Pope was sacrificing millions of Africans with AIDS on the altar of the Church's rigid moral dogma. By one count, more than 4,000 articles were filed on the subject. And what's astounding is the uniformity of the criticism -- that the Pope and the Church are backward and medieval, and that Catholic beliefs are a threat to the public health.

What happened? The Pope challenged one of the cultish little orthodoxies of our time, the cult of the condom, and the underlying ideology that sexual intercourse is a fundamental human "need" that can never be questioned - not even in situations where pursuing that need could cost you your life. So public discussion gets shut down. Nobody stops to consider that what the Pope said wasn't just sectarian religious belief, but that it actually makes good practical sense. Giving people condoms offers them a false sense of security and encourages the very behaviors that lead to the transmission of AIDS. What's even more frustrating is to know that leading AIDS-prevention research scientists in Africa actually agree with the Pope.

We're taught to think that we live in an open society that respects freedom of religion and the free exchange of different ideas. But we don't.

And we shouldn't kid ourselves. We may not be too far from the day when it will be legally discouraged to hold certain moral views and illegal to refuse to do certain things we find to be evil. The question then becomes: How are we going to live in this new world? How can we lead a "new life in Christ" in an unbelieving age?

We can't really answer that question until we get some things straight about what it means to be a Christian. And that means first getting some things straight about Jesus Christ. This is another one of the by-products of our secular times: We don't really quite know what to think about Jesus anymore. Why? Because our culture has given Jesus a make-over. We've remade him in the image and like-

ness of generic compassion. Today he's not the Lord, the Son of God, but more like an enlightened humanist nice guy.

The problem is this: If Jesus isn't Lord, if he isn't the Son of God, then he can't *do* anything for us. Then the Gospel is just one more or less interesting philosophy of life. And that's my first point about how we need to live in a secular age: We need to trust the Gospels, and we need to trust the Church that gives us the Gospels. We need to truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the son of Mary; true God and true man; the One who holds the words of eternal life. If we aren't committed to that truth, then nothing else I say tonight can make any sense.

Here a second point: Jesus didn't come down from heaven to tell us to go to church on Sunday. He didn't die on the cross and rise from the dead so that we'd pray more at home and be a little kinder to our next-door neighbors. The one thing even non-believers can see is that the Gospels aren't compromise documents. Jesus wants all of us. And not just on Sundays. He wants us to love God with *all* our heart, *all* our soul, *all* our strength, and *all* our mind. He wants us to love our neighbor *as ourselves*. In other words, with a love that's total.

We need to take Christ at his word. We need to love him like our lives depend on it. Right now. And without excuses. Remember the man in Scripture who told Jesus: I'm ready to be your disciple, but first I need to plan my father's funeral? The way Jesus responds is very blunt and rather disturbing: "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. Follow me and proclaim the kingdom of God."³ Of course, he's not commanding us to show disrespect for our parents. What Jesus *is* saying is that there can be no more urgent priority in our lives than following him and proclaiming his kingdom.

My third point flows from the first two: Being a follower of Jesus Christ is not just one among many different aspects of your daily life. Being a Christian is who you are. Period. And being a Christian means your life has a mission. It means striving every day to be a better follower, to become more like Jesus in your thoughts and actions.

Blessed Charles de Foucauld once said that, "God calls all the souls he has created to love him with their whole being. . . . But he does not ask all souls to show their love by the same works, to climb to heaven by the same ladder, to achieve goodness in the same way. What sort of work, then must I do? Which is *my* road to heaven?"⁴

God expects big things from each of us. That's why he made us. To love him and to serve one another, and to play our personal part in bringing about the kingdom of love. So you have to ask yourselves the same questions that Blessed Charles asked himself. What does God want *you* to be doing? How does he want *you* to follow Christ?

Now, how do you go about finding the answers to these questions? By talking to God, humbly and honestly, in prayer. By getting to know Christ better through daily reading and praying over the Gospels. By opening yourself up to the graces he gives us in the sacraments. "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you."⁵ It's not about you choosing what you want to do with your life. It's about discovering how God wants to use your life to spread the good news of his love and his kingdom.

Blessed Charles, by the way, is one of the great stories of the 20th century. He was a Frenchman who lived most of his life like the prodigal son, squandering his inheritance on alcohol, women, and dead-end pleasures. But when he came to know Jesus Christ, his life changed forever. He felt called to follow Christ literally, setting off on foot to Nazareth to devote himself to a humble life of manual labor, prayer, and charity. Some years later, his imitation of Christ led him to the Sahara Desert, where he lived as a hermit and eventually died a martyr's death.

Most of you will find your own road to heaven starting a little closer to home. That's appropriate. In fact, it's exactly what God intends. In the Gospel of Luke⁶, Jesus meets and reveals himself to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They're not heading for Jerusalem or Moscow or Ottawa or Beijing or Washington, D.C. They're on their way home. Likewise in the Gospel of Mark⁷, the angel tells the women at the empty tomb that Jesus "is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him as he told you." Galilee was an obscure and unimportant place. But it was the apostles' *home*.

In other words, Christ reveals himself to his followers *in their ordinary lives*. Jesus meets us on the way of life, and we find him again and again in the "breaking of the bread," and as we pray over the

Law of Moses, the prophets, the psalms and all of Scripture. Our encounter with him in our personal circumstances opens our minds to the meaning of all these things. Jesus wants us to grow where we're planted. Your task is to preach the Gospel with your lives no matter where you are or whatever you find yourself doing -- going to school, working, raising children, making a home.

One final point before we begin our questions and discussion tonight. And it's this: Love the Church; love her as your mother and teacher. Help to build her up, to purify her life and work. We all get angry when we see human weakness and sin in the Church. But we need to remember always that the Church is much, much more than the sum of her human parts.

The Church is the Bride of Christ. The Spirit that worked in Jesus Christ and in his apostles is still at work in the Church. Jesus promised his apostles that when they teach, it will be he who is teaching. That when they forgive sins, it will be he who forgives. That when they say his words, "This is my body," the bread and wine will become his body and blood. Jesus doesn't forget his promises. Where the Church is, Jesus Christ is -- until the end of the age. And we always want to be where Christ is, because there is no way home to God except through him.

So love the Church. And this is crucial: Know and revere what the Church teaches. What the Church teaches is what Christ wants you and everyone else to know -- for our own good and for our salvation. Know what the Church teaches so you can live those teachings and share those teachings with others.

The leaders of today's secularized societies like to fancy themselves as true humanists and humanitarians. But these same societies justify killing millions of babies in the womb and dismembering embryos in the laboratory. We dispatch the handicapped and the elderly and call it "death with dignity." Our very language has become subverted. The family is no longer the covenant communion of a man and woman that leads to new life and hence the future of society. In fact, there are so few babies being born now in developed, Western-style countries that we have to wonder whether our civilization has lost its will to survive.

Only the Church stands up against these inhuman trends in our societies. It's your mission, as lay men and lay women, to ensure that Christ's teaching is preached and explained and defended at every level of our society -- in politics, in the workplace, in the culture. This takes real courage. There are all sorts of pressures, subtle and not so subtle, to sell out Jesus. To water down or diminish his Gospel. To pick and choose among his teachings. But we can't do that. Make a promise to Jesus Christ never to contradict the Church's teachings by your words or actions.

Only the truth can set people free. That truth is Jesus Christ. So if we truly love our neighbors we will want them to know the truth. The whole truth. Not just the parts of it that make them feel good and don't challenge them to change.

It's not possible for real Christians to lead a double life; our whole way of thinking and acting needs to be transformed by our faith, or we make ourselves into hypocrites. Like our friend Franz once said, being a halfway Christian is like being a vegetable. It's not really a life. It's barely an existence. And that reminds me that it's time for me to tell you the rest of the story about Franz.

Germany invaded Austria in 1938. Unlike most of his neighbors, Franz refused to cooperate in any way with the new National Socialist regime because he considered Hitler to be an enemy of Christ and the Church. For five years he waged a personal campaign of moral resistance. But finally, he was arrested for refusing an order to enlist in the German army.

While awaiting his sentence, many people, including his family and his local priest, urged him to pay lip-service to the regime and thereby spare his life. Franz wouldn't do it.

So 66 summers ago, on August 9, 1943, Franz died on a Nazi guillotine. Today we remember him as Blessed Franz Jägerstätter -- a martyr for the truth that a Catholic can never lead a double life; that there can be no such thing as a halfway Christian.

Blessed Franz wrote beautiful letters to his wife from prison. In one of them he talked about the great martyrs of the Church. He wrote: "If we hope to reach our goal some day, then we, too, must become heroes of the faith. For as long as we fear men more than God, we will never make the grade." Another time he wrote: "The important thing is that we do not let a single day go by in vain without putting it to good use for eternity."⁸

That's the heart of the matter for anyone who wants to be a real Christian. That's the path to a new life in Christ: Put every day to good use for eternity. And the time to begin that is now.

Thanks, and God bless all of you.

Footnotes

1. 1 Cor 15:3-7
2. Gordon Zahn, *In Solitary Witness: The Life and Death of Franz Jägerstätter* (Beacon, 1964), 32.
3. cf. Luke 9:59-60.
4. *Charles de Foucauld* (Modern Spiritual Masters Series), 69-70.
5. Matt. 7:7
6. Lk 24:13-37
7. Mk 16:7
8. Zahn, 35, 73.