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Homilies

*Auxiliary Bishop of Denver*

## **Easter Sunday [2009] Homily**

*April 12, 2009*

A rather disturbing, but nonetheless very interesting article appeared in *Newsweek* magazine in the most recent issue dated April 13 (which is on the website now) entitled "The End of Christian America" by Jon Meacham.

In many ways it was a rather typical "doom and gloom synopsis" of the state of Christianity at the end of the 1st decade of the 21st century in the United States.

Citing a "2009 American Religious Identification Survey," the number of Americans "who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990, rising from 8 to 15 percent." The report goes on to say that "while the unaffiliated have historically been concentrated in the Pacific Northwest, the pattern has now changed, and the Northeast emerged in 2008 as the new stronghold of the religiously unaffiliated." The end of the report concluded that the so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture.

R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky (the "largest Protestant seminary"), was quoted in the article as saying "Clearly there is a new narrative, a post-Christian narrative, that is animating large portions of this society."

And yet, at the same time, in my experience as a priest and now as a bishop (Friday was my one year anniversary of being named auxiliary bishop of Denver) particularly working with college age students which is how I have spent the majority of my 23 years of priesthood, I see something very different.

This past January I attended a debate on the campus of the University of Colorado, Boulder (perhaps some of you were there) which was sponsored by the St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Student center which took place at Macky Hall at the center of the CU Boulder campus. The topic of the debate was very clear and straightforward "Atheism vs. Christianity." Representing the side of atheism and un-belief was the charming and elegant British writer Christopher Hitchens, author of the hugely popular atheist tract a few years ago, "God is Not Great," and who was cited in the *Newsweek* article. Representing the Christian side of the debate and arguing on behalf of believers was Dinesh D'Souza, scholar in residence at the Hoover Institution at the University of Stanford. I think it must have been the coldest day of the year, on a Monday night at the end of January and the 2,000 seat Macky Hall was filled to capacity with 300 more students in a satellite classroom watching the debate on a video screen. I would say that the auditorium was probably split 50-50 between believers and non-believers. Both debaters were very eloquent, polite and prepared. Hitchens, of course, argued that organized religion was a poison in our society and dismissed all religions as superstitious and un-intellectual and relied upon scientific data for his argument. D'Souza acknowledged the rightful place of science in the public square and noted that the greatest scientists in the history of the world: Newton, Galileo, Copernicus, Einstein, etc. were all believers and, while science may answer many questions as to "how" the world works, it doesn't give us much of the "why's" and "what fors" regarding how we should live our lives and, why we should love one another and forgive one another and suffer for one another, and what to hope for in the future,

I was reminded of that marvelous quote by Fr. Stanley Jaki, OSB, when he says: "the bible doesn't tell us how the heavens go, but, rather, how to go to heaven."

I don't think one could say who decisively won the debate, but the fact that a debate like this took place at all in 2009 and drew such large crowds at a very liberal and secular campus like CU Boulder is in itself remarkable. Bravo to Fr. Kevin Augustyn and Fr. Peter Mussett and their staff for organizing the event. I heard later on that both speakers ended up at a local pub and continued the debate into the wee hours of the morning!

Another interesting phenomenon that flies in the face of the Newsweek article is the fact that in a recent article an estimated 92,000 inactive Catholics in the Diocese of Phoenix, Arizona have come home to the Church in the last year - 92,000!

CatholicsComeHome.org is an international apostolate welcoming fallen away, inactive and non-Catholics home to the Catholic Church.

"Phoenix was supposed to be this quiet test market," said Tom Peterson, president and founder of CatholicsComeHome.org, "and word spread worldwide as soon as we launched."

How did it happen? Simply by airing TV commercials inviting people to come home to the Church.

In a three week primetime TV campaign aired during the season of Lent last year, six months after the campaign ended, a comprehensive analysis of its impact revealed a 22% increase in Mass attendance at nine sample parishes. Throughout the diocese, the average increased Mass attendance, returned and new Catholics, was 12%. That's despite a flat population growth in the diocese during that period.

Many of the people interviewed who came back to the Church and the Sacrament by making a Sacramental Confession, said they drifted away from the Church simply because "the world got in the way" and returned to the Church and a life of faith "because you invited me!"

The study proposes that in today's unstable turbulent economic climate, more people are humbled and receptive to restoring their relationship with God than when they are distracted by the lures of the world during economic "good times." They are looking for deeper answers and for hope.

St. Paul tells us today: "if then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the God. Think what is above, not what is on earth."

The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead has been believed and disbelieved from that very first Easter morning. The apostles and disciples even had their doubts, like St. Thomas, but they all eventually came to believe. Indeed, they were crushed by the events of Good Friday and like very down-to-earth men, they saw the logic, cynical as it was, of those who jeered Jesus beneath the cross: "He saved others, let him save himself!"

Strangely enough those who jeered at Jesus, later became the most ardent believers in the Resurrection.

There were those who made up the story for the sepulcher guards to explain it away by saying: "while we slept, the apostles came and stole the body."

Through the centuries others have simply denied the Resurrection and others have said it was a fraud or hoax.

But here we are! 2,000 years later just like those first Christians on that first Easter morn.

To think that this fraud could be perpetuated for 2,000 years, and all the brilliant theologians like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Catherine of Siena, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Pope John Paul II were all fooled and naively misled, not to mention all the great men and women of science who have been believers of the Resurrection, is more incredible for me to believe that the Resurrection itself.

But ultimately faith is a gift. In the words of the great friend French writer, Gabriel Marcel, "faith is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved." Jesus himself said there will be those who will not believe even if a man should be raised from the dead. "For those who do have the gift of faith, no amount of proof is necessary, for those who do not have the gift of faith, no amount of proof is sufficient."

Although the Resurrection of Jesus remains a mystery, as to how it occurred, it is a real event with the evidence that is historically verified, not just in the four gospels, but in all of St. Paul's writings and in historical accounts from secular writers of that day, Josephus, the Jewish historian.

There were many overjoyed witnesses who saw the Risen Christ, like the women in today's Gospel, there was the empty tomb with the linen cloths lying there, there were the terror-stricken guards, there was the rolled away stone.

Perhaps the strongest argument for the Resurrection is the fact that his closest followers, those who were so timid and demoralized during Passion Week, suddenly became very bold and fearless and many eventually died a martyr's death with hearts and minds firmly convinced in the Resurrection.

St. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, "If Christ has not risen, our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain."

When we stop and think about this simple statement it is true. The whole Christian message is the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. If he did not rise from the dead, then we might as well pack it all up and go home.

The Catholic Church claims to have 65 million members in the United States, people who self-identify as Roman Catholics.

What percentage of that 65 million truly believe in everything the Church proposes for belief? I don't know. We have never been about numbers.

When Joseph Ratzinger was Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, before he became Pope Benedict XVI, he was asked in an interview the state and health of the Church. He said the Church was young, alive and growing, just a lot smaller than most people think.

Jesus started with twelve. And here we are today.

Let me conclude with a real story of faith in the Resurrection of Jesus. This past Holy Week we had two funerals on Wednesday and Thursday, Donnie Neal, wife of Deacon John Neal, and the son of one of the professors at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary, Dr. Joel Barstad.

Donnie had suffered from cancer this past year. She was a woman of deep faith and she knew she was dying. With her husband and her family at her side, just before she died, she lifted her arm as if to reach out to the world beyond and with a smile on her face, breathed her last breath. She believed in the Resurrection. Now she knows the Resurrection.