

## TOWARD BUILDING A RECONCILING WORLD

It is an honor indeed to be with you this evening as part of Loyola University's Chapel Series. A much-needed antidote to the pessimism that saturates the newspapers and media these days, the theme of these monthly reflections is a reminder of God's promises and the call to renew our faith commitment. My effort this evening will be directed toward examining how we each can play our small but crucial role in building a reconciling world, because we may be the only one who will pass this way today, the only one who notices the anxious student, the bereft co-worker, the troubled family member. So we open our eyes and our hearts and do what we are able.

The invitation of the Scripture passage from Paul's Second letter to the Corinthians 5:17-21, just proclaimed so compellingly by Sister Christine, is a powerful reminder of the reality that the world is reconciled to God through Christ. In turn we are commissioned to become that reconciling presence of Christ in our fractured world and church. What better time could there be than the season of Lent to reflect on how we can respond to this charge!

In this evening's reflection, I would like to explore with you some of the ways we might fulfill the immense need for healing and peace, including both our own personal situations and those of the whole world. Last week I was listening to a tape by Bishop Wilton Gregory on African American Catholics and Racism, entitled, "Enduring Faith." He made a profound statement about reconciliation that remind me of the stages and complexity of what we aim to do: "Human relationships are never restored simply with words, but only with words that are followed by action." Bishop Gregory emphasizes

that reconciliation is not facile or quick, but when it comes from the heart it is the source of powerful healing.

In light of the terrorism, wars, and scandals of recent years, we are undoubtedly saddened and concerned and yet I believe there is room for—yes, a desperate need for—hope and reconciliation in the midst of our distressing times.

Consider the world so troubled by violence and war. We ask, "Where are the peacemakers? Who has the genius and the capacity to bring together alienated nations? Who has the desire to do so?"

- Consider our states and local governments on the verge of, or experiencing, economic disaster. We ask, "Who is paying attention to those without voice, to the poor and the homeless? What is fair in terms of taxation and distribution of wealth? Who has the desire to look out for the common good rather than for individual gain only?"
- Consider the world of business and commerce so rife with corruption and greed. We ask, "Who will act with honesty and integrity and engage in fair business practices? Who will teach the new MBAs and attorneys the power each one holds to do good or ill for society? What essential principles of justice are being taught? How can those who have suffered from the crimes of others be compensated?"
- Consider the church whose moral authority has been so seriously eroded by clerical sexual abuse and the cover-up scandal. We ask, "How can the Gospel message of forgiveness be spoken with force in the midst of the present crisis?"

What can we do to restore confidence in the church? Who will be invited to join in the struggle of renewing our faith?"

- Consider our families and workplaces so deeply affected by what is happening in the world around us. We ask, "What is needed to maintain balance and stability in the midst of widespread turbulence? How can we ensure that children will be raised in a peaceful world? What can be done to enliven our faith and enkindle hope?"

Response to these questions provides an enormous agenda, but, in addition to these issues, I have gained insight about other concerns from students in a class I teach—"Cross-cultural Perspectives on Religion and Society." When introducing the course I ask students to identify some major cultural trends that prevail in our times relating to the two concepts of religion and society. Their lists are usually long, but not often cheerful. Some of their ideas have potential for at least some good: awareness of the fragility of the environment, and advances in science, technology, and communications, or even globalization. Depending on how one interprets these notions, human development is certainly possible within them.

More often, however, students list trends like: escalating nationalism, an expanding divide between rich and poor, the abandonment of moral integrity in business, rising fundamentalism, and increasing interaction of religion and violence. We could all certainly add our own woes. What strikes me about the issues and concerns is the common thread of division and disagreement, often ending in injustice if not aggression and violence.

The classroom is not the only place where such disabling trends are being identified. In a recent book by Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood: Changes from Vatican II to the Turn of the New Century* (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2003), they point out the present disjunction between younger and older priests. More disquieting than these differences are the judgments of each group about the other.

“Younger priests called the older priests liberals, leftist fringe, secularized, anti-establishment, a ‘lost generation,’ and priests with a social work model” (p. 113). “Older priests referred to the young men as inflexible, divisive, liturgically conservative, institutional, hierarchical, and believers in a cultic priesthood” (p. 114). They worry about what research confirms, that younger priests are out of tune with their lay contemporaries, as well as with many older parishioners. While not everyone uses or accepts these negative descriptions, these stereotypes were used again and again by respondents. This persistent, destructive, and unacceptable pattern can prevent parishes and other ministries from thriving. For congregations experiencing the ministry of both types of priests—older pastor and younger associate—or going through a transition from one type of pastor to another, the changeover is likely to be disruptive and problematic. For lay ministers caught between the two camps, the consequences may be even more distressing.

Clearly, old dichotomies need to be collapsed and new ways of relating explored. Susan Wood, in her commentary in the book by Hoge and Wenger, recommends that our ecclesial imaginations need to be stretched to incorporate more of a communion ecclesiology, where relationship rather than essential differences are highlighted. The

path to that kind of unity will be long in coming, she says, for it entails constructive theological work that must be filtered to laity and priests alike.

In whatever ways we might want to describe what ails us these days, my point is not to dwell excessively on the problems, but to explore with you how we might become involved in the world with a sense of hope and expectation for improvement. How can we spend the rest of our lives to create a more promising future for our desperate world? The temptation, I believe, is to feel that problems are so overwhelming and so beyond our reach that any one person is powerless to effect change—not necessarily so. Consider Mother Teresa and Cardinal Bernardin, for example. Their simple actions of feeding the starving and caring for the dying, or developing a theology and structure for dialogue have made an enormous difference. Of course, she is now a “blessed” on her way to sainthood and he was a former Cardinal. But still, let me propose a possible way for any one of us, even though we have no titles, to enter into this world-healing project.

Consider for a moment the many communities of which we are a part—nation and state, worship and work, neighborhood and family. What quality or virtue might be valuable in generating hope in these settings of our daily lives? I suggest that cultivating a spirit of reconciliation—bringing into agreement or harmony those people and things that are estranged—would go a long way in creating decency and peace in these troubled times. How might this spirit be made manifest?

Several years ago, in 1996, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, established the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, an effort to reduce the polarization and acrimony that he found in the church. He called for a renewed spirit of civility, dialogue, and generosity to heal the divisions, and he suggested some simple approaches and processes to move us in

the direction of reconciliation. He spoke of some principles of dialogue in relation to the Church (contained in the document “*Called to Be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril*”).

I suggest that these might be valuable in today’s environment not only for resolution of church issues, but also for other concerns that divide the world. The principles address three dimensions:

1. **Who should be included in the discussion?** Everyone who has something at stake should be invited into the dialogue, for no single group or viewpoint has a complete monopoly on the truth.
  - Church leaders have special responsibilities for the faith, but solutions to the church’s problems will almost inevitably emerge from a variety of sources, including lay people who are living out their faith in the world.
  - Government leaders have duties as elected officials, but all citizens must participate in order for democracy to flourish.
  - Business leaders have the obligation to be ethical and to care for employees, but all workers need to contribute to the good of the workplace and those who depend on them.
  
2. **What attitudes should we have toward those with whom we dialogue?**
  - We should presume that those with whom we differ are acting in good faith, deserving of civility and charity, and undeserving of blanket criticism or denunciation.
  - We should look for the valid insights and legitimate concerns of others and try to address their strongest positions rather than discredit them by attacking their weakest points.
  - In the same mode, we might demonstrate respect for others by being cautious about rendering quick negative judgments and impugning their motives.
  
3. **What considerations should be made concerning the context of the dialogue?**
  - We should engage the realities of contemporary culture by acknowledging both its achievements and its real dangers. All proposals should be tested for their pastoral realism and for their potential impact on living human beings.

As we examine our own *modus operandi*, we might explore how well we follow these principles and also what blocks us from concern about others. It might be laziness or self-indulgence, or more likely busyness and over-extension, or ambition and envy, and a perpetual desire to make the winning point over our opposition. Parker Palmer, in his book, *The Courage to Teach*, talks about why we have such a hard time with these basic suggestions for decent human interaction. He says we distort things all the time

...because we are trained neither to voice both sides of an issue nor to listen with both ears. The problem goes deeper than the bad habit of competitive conversation some of us have: tell me your thesis and I will find any way, fair or foul, to argue the other side! It is rooted in the fact that we look at the world through analytical lenses. We see everything as this or that, plus or minus, on or off, black or white; and we fragment reality into an endless series of *either-ors*. In a phrase, we think the world apart (p. 62).

In our own small universe, perhaps each of us can go about discovering ways to “think the world together.” For example, we might try dialogue rather than debate,

- where we contribute our best ideas to be improved upon rather than defending the indefensible with the hope of wearying our opponents;
- where we are willing to evaluate ourselves rather than criticize others;
- where we try to see all sides of an issue rather than two sides—mine and the wrong one;
- and where we listen to each other to understand and build agreement rather than listening to find flaws and reasons to disagree.

As basic as these ideas may seem, they are not easily put into practice. This stance calls for a certain generosity of spirit. It feels so good to “win” after all. But at what ultimate cost to the greater good! If we can discipline ourselves to think beyond ourselves, the payoff is great for us personally and for the company we keep and the world we share.

I remember an occasion when I was speaking to a group about some of these ideas and one gentleman stood up to disagree quite disagreeably with me. Having just

spoken about being a reconciling person, I dared not respond to him in kind, so while he ranted and raved, I prayed—silently—to the Holy Spirit. Realizing that no precise argument would be persuasive, when he finally took a breath, I said something like "I respect your right to your views and I'm glad you had the courage to voice them." He retorted in his booming voice, "Well, all right then," and promptly sat down, but somehow I knew this was not the end of the discussion. As soon as the questions were finished and the group adjourned for coffee, this man raced to the front of the room, still enraged. He continued with his diatribe, to which I knew there was no adequate answer. Finally, I simply put my hand on his arm and said, "God must love you very much." He was puzzled and said, "Why are you saying that? No one has ever said that to me before." (Not too hard to understand why, I thought.) But I responded, "I know by what you said, you obviously care a great deal about the church and you want the best for it." Then I asked, "Do you remember last Sunday's Gospel? The one where Jesus comes to the apostles after the Resurrection? They are all gathered, fearful, in the upper room. He appears to them and says, 'Peace be with you. Peace be with you!' That is my wish for you, too." The man was flabbergasted and began to cry. He confessed that he had moved five times in the past two years because he didn't like the parish he was in; his wife was getting very disgusted having to move a family of seven again and again. I suggested that he might try just to pray when he went to church and not to set every pastor right about how to say Mass. He talked calmly for a bit and then said he couldn't wait to get home to tell his wife about what had happened. I don't know the ultimate outcome for this man, but such moments remind us that beyond any power of our own, the grace of God works powerfully in others to transform their lives. The words of Jesus

brought this afflicted man a degree of comfort. Granted, most of our opponents don't go away that easily, but this difficult exchange ended somewhat peacefully by simply listening to and respecting this person.

I find hope in other places, too. In a class I teach at The Saint Paul Seminary on Pastoral Ministry in American Culture, I was stressing the importance of exercising ministry in a reconciling and compassionate spirit. In past years these admonitions have, I am afraid, fallen on deaf ears more often than I would hope, with objections always put in terms of the "pastoral approach" being too soft and not upholding "the truth" of some particular doctrine or dogma. Not to be deterred—even after thirteen years of limited success with my approach—and bolstered by Pope John Paul II's 2001 World Day of Peace address on "Dialogue Between Cultures for a Civilization of Love and Peace" (*Origins*, Vol. 30, No. 29), I told the story of a distraught freshman college student who, after about six weeks at school, had approached me with the distressing news that she was pregnant. She came to tell me she was going to seek an abortion. My first response to her was of great compassion and concern. I asked her what had happened and she responded that, unwisely, she had attended an off-campus party where apparently she was victimized by a date-rape type drug, resulting in her being impregnated by an unknown person. Her greatest fear was in telling of her pregnancy to her parents and a favorite aunt who taught at the school. She said her parents would be furious and would disown her and her aunt would be terribly disappointed. In the midst of all the fear and anxiety, she also worried about her status in the Church. Could she ever be forgiven?

As I told the story some seminarians were dismayed that I didn't hit her over the head with an explanation of the gravity of the sin she was about to commit. Rather, while

acknowledging the wrongness of the choice, I talked to her about her fears and encouraged her to consider taking some time before proceeding with her strong intention. Over a period of a few weeks, she decided to talk with her aunt, who supported her totally. To make a long story short, she went to her disappointed but equally understanding parents and ultimately gave birth to a healthy child. Lots of reconciling was required in this sad situation to yield such a wonderful outcome. One of the seminarians who usually carries the sternest of demeanors raised his hand and said, “I think I have to change my approach. It isn’t always a good idea to tell people they are sinful.” After class another student of the strict dispensation offered that he knew he would have to be more gentle and patient in talking with people. Tiny breakthroughs, yes, but examples of the hope we must pray to spread to bring true reconciliation.

To be able to respond with kindness and compassion while maintaining our integrity takes wisdom and courage. Where can we find the will to be the reconciling person in all the circumstances of our life? It seems to me that we need to be in touch with the mystery of God in our lives, becoming increasingly aware of God’s active presence. If we look beneath the surface, we encounter God as loving and challenging us, inspiring and empowering us. Though we may be able to do a lot of things for God, the church, and the world, if we are out of touch with the mystery—if our faith and our life are separated, our existence is shallow, our actions empty. By deepening our faith, paying attention to the pattern of God’s movement, we can become true reconcilers.

In his book, *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser, O.M.I., speaks about the necessity of pondering if we are to sustain our faith. He says that "to ponder is less a question of intellectually contemplating something as it is of patiently holding it inside

one's soul, complete with all the tension that brings. Thus when Mary stands under the cross of Jesus and watches him die...she is carrying a great tension that she is helpless to resolve and must simply live with (p. 220)." She "kept these things in her heart and pondered them." We are called upon to do the same kind of pondering as Mary did. If we are willing to ponder and wait before we speak a sharp or unjustly critical word, before we judge family members unfairly and alienate them, before we depart from a gathering in anger, we can bring reconciliation. Fr. Rolheiser suggests, "We are better persons when we carry tension, as opposed to always looking for its easy resolution." This calls for a certain greatness of soul, he says, for if we try to resolve tension too soon or not at all we miss a more sublime experience. We need to sublimate our need for resolution to put other people's needs into the equation. "Great joy depends upon first having carried great tension (p. 221)."

By following such a path, we can bring into harmony those around us who are estranged. Whatever our humanitarian impulses or religious beliefs, we hold in common a desire for peace and a reverence for life. In words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, we might "Start by doing what is necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly we will be doing the impossible." As impossible as it may seem that any one of us can make a difference in our fractured world, imagine if each person here today—let's say 300 of us—performed one reconciling act every day, what a different world we would know! In one year we would have 100,000 acts of reconciliation and in ten years more than a million circumstances where healing is imparted. Each of us will be returning to situations where we can contribute in small and large ways to unity and peace—

beginning at home, moving to our place of work, and finally reverberating through the whole world.

In the movie on the Passion I have been told there is a touching moment when Jesus meets his mother on the way to Calvary. As he turns away he says to Mary, “I will make all things new,” a verse from Revelation, but also in the spirit of the passage from Corinthians, “So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.” It is up to each of us to let pass the old long-held grievances, the old ways of thinking the world apart, the old wounded egos. We liberate ourselves so that we can make all things new in Christ by building new relationships, thinking in new inclusive categories, and bringing new life by healing painful memories.

As we make this move beyond ourselves from old to new, to a world awaiting our reconciling presence, we might consider the implications of living out our faith. Vincent Hovley, S.J., in an article, "A Rock to Build On," (*Review for Religious*, Sept./Oct. 1994), says that, "We search for the healing and peace that comes from knowing how deeply God acts in our lives. Without that peace...we find it hard to be present to anything but our anxious concerns." At issue, Father Hovley says, is whether we are willing to make a covenant of our lives in order:

- To find a heart to face our future without fear and with great trust, to surrender our spirit into God's hands,
- to find a heart to call down the flow of God's holiness and to plunge ourselves into it, to passover into it,
- to find a heart to pledge ourselves as bread and wine poured out for others—this is Christ again making his covenant, his passover, in us (p. 776).

All the tensions arising from political and economic concerns, from religious and personal worries, require of us a reflective stance that leads to a calming, reconciling

presence as we incorporate into our thoughts and actions the hopes and longings of others. I invite you to be among those who renew the face of the earth one step at a time. Can we retain a spirit of hope year-round so that we may be reconciling messengers of peace to all those we meet.

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