

PRAYING FOR A NEW PENTECOST: A PASTORAL LETTER ON EVANGELIZATION

Almost eight weeks have passed since my installation as the Fourth Bishop of Bridgeport on March 19, 2001. Since then I have had the privilege of visiting well over half of the parishes of the Diocese where I have had the joy of offering Holy Mass on Sundays as well as week-days. On those occasions I have also enjoyed the opportunity of meeting so many parishioners and sharing a cup of coffee and a bite of breakfast with my brother priests and deacons. It has also been a joy to begin confirming throughout the Diocese, and, in the process, I have met so many of our young people and their families. In addition, I have just begun my visits to schools (two high schools thus far) and have enjoyed attending large gatherings in support of our works of education, charity, and service.

Thanks to the hard work of Father Samuel Scott, my priest secretary, I am being scheduled to celebrate Mass in the remaining parishes. My hope is to get to all 87 parishes long before the summer has ended – with time out for a retreat and a vacation.

Initial Snapshot

I cannot sufficiently thank my brother priests and deacons, parish leadership, and parishioners for the wonderfully warm welcome I have received. You have made my responsibility of coming to know a new family of faith pleasant and easy. You have made me feel at home and you have helped me get an initial snapshot of some of the pastoral needs of the Diocese.

As I speak with hardworking pastors and visit with faithful parishioners, I readily sense their deep desire not only to build on past strengths, but also to spread the Gospel with fresh vigor. Indeed, my travels have helped me focus on the urgency of the God-given mandate to share the Good News, summed up in the words of Saint Paul: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” Woe to me and woe to us all if we do not unite in proclaiming boldly and faithfully the Gospel message as it comes to us in the Scriptures as well as the teaching and worship of the Church.

Faithful Witnesses

Approaching the feast of Pentecost, we recognize that no task, no responsibility has a greater claim on our consciences than proclaiming and bearing witness to the Good News. And as we witness anew the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church, we recognize that we share in the same Holy Spirit through Baptism and Confirmation. The Holy Spirit enables us to open our minds and hearts to the teaching of Jesus as it comes to us through the Church. The Holy Spirit gives us the strength and courage we need to be the Lord’s witnesses and faithful members of His Body, the Church – in spite of all the challenges we encounter along the way.

With clear-eyed realism, we also recognize the complexities, pressures, and obstacles we face in spreading the Gospel. But with unbounded hope, we shall not bow to those impediments as excuses for not engaging in vigorous evangelization. The Scriptural readings for the Season of Easter and the liturgy of Pentecost proclaim how the apostles and disciples went about preaching the Gospel and establishing communities of faith. They did so in the face of persecution and harassment. Not only were they undeterred by the obstacles they faced, they were joyful in their sufferings and tribulations. That is real Easter and Pentecost joy – a joy that no one and no set of circumstances can take from us as we proclaim the One who is Lord and Savior, the One who lives in our midst through the teaching, worship, and mission of the Church. Indeed, the Spirit of the Risen Lord teaches us – again and again – how to turn challenges into opportunities for the sake of the authentic Gospel we have received.

What are some of the challenges we face? What are some of the obstacles that must be overcome as we seek to proclaim the Name above every other name? Let me list a few of them while, at the same time, offering some reflections on turning challenges into opportunities.

Ungodly Work Week

First, we live in a cultural atmosphere that leaves very little room for God and the things of God. Although North Americans – by world standards – are inveterate churchgoers, we can readily sense how our culture crowds out the practice of the faith. For example, too many people put in an ungodly work week – some by necessity, others by choice. I think of the newly arrived who have to work multiple low-paying jobs just to make ends meet. I think of those in high-pressure jobs, absorbed by the demands of the workplace, leaving little time for relationships with God, Church, and family. I think of parents trying to juggle the multiple demands of their families and places of work. Unfortunately, too many of our people lead hectic lives without nourishing their minds, hearts, and souls with the living Word of God, the Eucharist, and Reconciliation.

We even subject our young people to similar pressures. Their schedules are often overly crowded with activities, curricular and extracurricular. Sunday Mass, religious education, and even the occasional family meal go by the wayside as the pace accelerates. For example, some elementary and high school sports leagues schedule games on Sunday morning – making young people choose between practicing their faith and staying on the team. In this super-charged atmosphere, not only does the practice of religion suffer, the very fabric of family life comes apart at the seams when Moms and Dads and their children do not pray together, eat together, and spend time talking about the things that really matter. What free time we do have is often filled with entertainment that is less than uplifting. The songs, icons, and symbols of our culture glorify self-absorption – lives lived only for the pursuit of power, wealth, or pleasure. Nothing new about that, but we are so easily seduced by the same old entertainment products endlessly reinvented. Sexually-laden and violence-ridden entertainment often ridicules family values, promotes coarse behavior, and demeans the practice of religion. Such fare leaves so many with a tragically impoverished view about the purpose and destiny of our human existence.

Denies Humanity

An impoverished view of what it means to be a human being is not merely a problem of professional philosophers or theologians to ponder. More and more it is having an impact on our daily lives as the “culture of death” advances in spite of wonderful advances in science, medicine, and technology. For example, our culture routinely denies the humanity of the unborn child. More and more it is eyeing the frail elderly as candidates for non-personhood. Recently, for example, the government in Holland gave doctors the right to terminate the lives of patients whose lives are judged no longer worth sustaining. At the same time, experiments related to human cloning raise scary new possibilities.

Add to these problems a natural tendency to shrink from controversy and the uncertainty many people have about bearing witness to the faith. Some simply are not sure what the Church actually teaches or else they lack the explicit vocabulary to speak about the faith even to family members, friends, and loved ones. Perhaps the greatest challenge to our spreading the Gospel is our own spiritual hunger. If we would be good evangelizers, we need to draw nearer to the Lord to nourish our souls through His Word and Sacrament and through the friendship that comes from a sustained life of prayer.

In the face of these and other challenges, some are tempted to search for a single uplifting religious experience, a moment to be caught up in a wave of enthusiasm and even ecstasy. Some imagine that they would follow Jesus more closely if only they could feel better about themselves. And in their search for a spiritual experience, they may be prone to accept an incomplete version of the Gospel message.

Such a version usually does not include vitally important realities such as the seven Sacraments (including Eucharist and Penance); the role of the Holy Father and the Bishops in ensuring the truth of what is taught with respect to faith and morals; devotion to the saints; and much, much more.

Practical Faith

Rallies and festivals can play a part in our spiritual journey. But there is no substitute for day-by-day discipleship based on the full Gospel message as it comes to us through the Church, rooted in Baptism, sustained by the Eucharist, and renewed by the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance. There is no substitute for putting our faith into practice in our daily lives -- whether we are at home or at work or enjoying a moment of relaxation. And we cannot really practice our Catholic faith without being part of a parish faith community or other group that is recognized and authenticated by the Church.

As I travel from parish to parish, I meet so many of you who are taking your faith seriously and putting it into practice each day. I meet many people whose lives manifest a deep love for the Lord and sense a youthful enthusiasm among people of all ages, a zest for the faith that is born of the Holy Spirit. Although the Spirit does not descend on us as tongues of flame, nonetheless the Spirit has been poured forth into our hearts through Baptism and Confirmation, and that same Spirit guides the Church throughout history. Relying on that Holy Spirit, we can also discover ways to turn challenges in spreading the faith into opportunities.

Daily Prayer

First, we have to advocate good time management. Time is our most precious commodity. We should not only use it, we should also invest it. The best way to invest our time is to set aside some of it, on a daily basis, for prayer. Our daily prayer takes only a miniscule part of our day; yet that small investment will yield an eternity of friendship with God. How important we begin our day with prayer; that we seek the Lord's guidance in the midst of our daily routine; that we entrust ourselves and our loved ones to the Lord before ending our day. How important that parents teach their children to pray and that they pray with them. Parents who do pray with their children find themselves being drawn closer to the Lord. A child's open and loving approach to the Lord helps all of us appreciate all the more how much the Lord loves us. How important that we never deprive our children of the opportunity to practice their faith by failing to bring them to Church on Sunday.

Best Investment

The best possible investment of time are the brief moments we spend participating in the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy, the Mass. Sunday Mass may take an hour and a half, including travel time. Yet think of what we receive for our investment: as a community and as individuals, we hear the living Word of God and we are nourished at the banquet of Christ's Sacrifice. We are drawn ever deeper into the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord. We share in the greatest act of love in all of human history!

It should not be unthinkable that we would share our "investment tips" with family members, neighbors, and friends. All of us know people, perhaps in our own families and in our own circle of friends, who have stopped praying and who have stopped going to Church. We should not hesitate to employ some "friendly persuasion" to encourage them to return to the Lord and His Church. What great treasures we have as Roman Catholics -- yet how hesitant we are to speak of them!

Second, we need to break free of the kind of entertainment that absorbs so much of our time and, in the end, diminishes it. Those parents who have the courage to limit the use of the T.V. and the Internet find they have much more time for one another and for their children. They have time to talk over problems and disappointments. Both parents and children need to spend time together in order to absorb the virtues and values that make us good human beings and true followers of Christ.

To be sure, entertainment is an important part of life, but it should be chosen carefully and consumed prudently, with a view toward enriching us intellectually and spiritually.

Third, as the pace of technology accelerates, we should rejoice as members of a Church with profound respect for the dignity of the human person and with such a wise and well-developed teaching on bio-medical matters. Sometimes a simplified version of the Gospel -- without the complications of a closely reasoned moral theology -- seems appealing. But that simply won't do. In today's world it is more necessary than ever that "ethics keep pace with technology." Nor should we allow ourselves to be passive observers as we enter upon the brave new world of embryonic stem-cell research and human cloning. Rather, we should be well informed about the Church's teaching and actively work for the highest ethical standards in biomedical research and a profound respect for the human lives of the unborn and the frail elderly.

Shed Our Timidity

Finally, you and I need to shed our spirit of timidity. All too often we are like the bewildered apostles who locked themselves in the Upper Room after the Lord's death. We should pray to the Holy Spirit that we would have neither fear nor hesitation in living and proclaiming our faith. A daily life of prayer grounded in Sunday and even daily Mass is fundamental to our lives of faith. And all of us need to make use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation on a regular basis if we would bear witness to Jesus with a clear conscience.

On-the-job virtue and integrity constitute a magnificent witness to the faith. A strong and loving family life is a vitally important way of bearing witness to the Lord. Serving the poor and the needy is another way to show that we are truly the Lord's disciples. But it is also vitally important that we be well-informed Catholic Christians, able to speak a word of truth and a word of life to family members, co-workers, and friends. How important that we bring the light of the Gospel into the homes, offices, classrooms, laboratories, factories, and places of business that we frequent on a daily basis.

New Pentecost

Throughout his papacy, John Paul II has sought to make the Church more dynamic, more robust, and ever more faithful in the proclamation of the Gospel. At the beginning of this new millennium, he has instructed all of us "to put out into the deep." He urges us to cast our nets into the deep and turbulent waters of human culture and history, confident that we will find many new followers of the Lord and members of His Body, the Church. As I begin my service in Bridgeport, I invite each of you -- my priests, deacons, religious, and members of the laity -- to pray with me for a "new Pentecost" here in Fairfield County. I ask you to work closely with me as we proclaim and spread the Gospel with renewed fidelity, vigor, and love.

Most Reverend William E. Lori
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