

National Catholic Council of Women
Address to Convention
Thursday, August 30, 2018

I. Introduction:

- a. I wish to express my thanks for the opportunity to share faith with you this morning
 - i. I am grateful to Mary Beth for her personal kindness to me and for her wonderful leadership of the NCCW
 - ii. I also wish to express my thanks to all of you and for the great work that the NCCW does in service of the Lord and the mission of the Church
- b. I come before you this morning cognizant that we are living in a moment of the Church's life that is both a great crisis and great opportunity
 - i. It is a moment that invites us to face the crime of sexual abuse in our midst and to seek accountability for those who are perpetrators or collaborators in these crimes and
 - ii. It is also a moment that gives us great spiritual opportunities, through repentance, reparation and conversion, especially on the part of the Church's leadership, to seek the purification and renewal of our Church
- c. My topic this morning is to explore discipleship as an invitation to be "a joyful contradiction in the world"
 - i. It remains our destination this morning but the route has changed, given the gravity, hurt, anger and disappointment many feel. The promise given to all disciples is to live a joyful life in Christ, as a harbinger of the glory that awaits us in heaven. Despite the grave challenges before us, this remains our destiny in Christ
 - ii. Today we will try to outline the path to such joy, precisely by naming the challenges before us and rediscovering the power of hope.

II. The challenges we face are deep, profound and demand immediate, bold and decisive action!

- a. The scourge of the crime of sexual abuse and the failure of some Church leaders to respond effectively to it have created a moment of crisis that I call "spiritual twilight". For just as twilight is a time when darkness and light are intermingled, so too we are experiencing great spiritual darkness as we unmask the great evil of the abuse of children and young people in our midst, while at the same time recognizing and celebrating the light of faith, generosity and charity, which you, my friends, represent.
- b. The failure we have experienced exists on many levels.

- i. There is the profound failure of some priests who betrayed their calling and sacred vocation.
 - 1. My spiritual director admonished me one week before my ordination that to be called “father” meant that I would live faithfully all the duties and responsibilities associated with that noble vocation. For any Father gives life, protects, nourishes, defends, encourages and loves his wife and children.
 - 2. A spiritual father is called to love his wife, who is the Bride of Christ, the Church, and to give his life in sacrifice and love for those entrusted to his care. For any father who betrays this sacred vocation creates a wound that is very hard to heal, for it deeply hurts the very lives he was meant to protect.
 - 3. It was Saint Augustine who in a series of powerful sermons outlined the profound difference between the “good” and “bad” shepherds. He likened of bad shepherds to wolves who feed on their flock, destroying their lives for his own pleasure. We have seen clearly the devastation that even a single wolf can have!
 - 4. We have countless good, holy priests who cannot be forgotten in this hour of trial and pain for them. However, we must hold everyone accountable to the wise words of the Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen who once said: “If you do not act what you believe, soon you will believe what you act.” The time has come for everyone in Sacred Orders to live what he believes.

- ii. We have also seen the failure of those who said nothing when they recognized evil in their midst.
 - 1. In New York City, there is a sign in every subway car: “If you see something, say something.” This is a simple paraphrase of Saint Paul who warns his listeners to say yes, when they mean yes and to say no when they mean no
 - 2. It is time for all of God’s people to speak up when they observe questionable behavior and to take down the wall of silence that sometimes exists in our parishes and diocese. For to keep silence in the mistaken hope to avoid scandal only results in deep wounds and the creation of even greater scandal.

- iii. Finally, we have seen the failure of some bishops who did not understand or chose to ignore this great evil in our midst. Admittedly, many times decisions were made with the “best of intentions” and with the “best knowledge” available at the time. While this may be true, it does not mitigate the great pain, hurt and trauma that survivors of abuse have endured for their entire life

- c. We are left with three questions:
 - i. Can we move forward? My answer to this question is yes.
 - ii. Can we live joyful discipleship in this hour of such great challenge? I believe that the answer to this question is yes.
 - iii. Can we say “Mission Possible”? The answer is yes, we can.
- d. While I do not pretend to have a full answer to all these questions, I do believe that we can move forward and find a path to joy despite such deep suffering, pain, confusion and anger. For this reason, I invite you to walk with me and rediscover the power of hope that alone can lead us to true joy.

III. The gift of Hope

- a. What is Hope? As a natural human attribute, hope is universal in nature. You do not have to be a Christian to have hope. On its most basic human level, hope is tied to the human desire to be happy and fulfilled.
 - i. Our ordinary lives are filled with many desires. They include the desire to be happy, content, to be healthy, to be loved and to love, to live in peace, to succeed and to be accepted. There is nothing wrong with any of these desires.
 - ii. However, at times, these desires can divert us from seeking the one “holy desire” that is at the root of every human life. This holy desire is the same “restlessness” that Saint Augustine celebrates in his autobiography, *The Confessions*. He says, “Our hearts are restless until they rest with Thee, O God.”
- b. Christian Hope is intimately tied to the deep restlessness of every human heart. It is a theological virtue that is given to us in Baptism and desires something deeper. In fact, it does not desire something but Someone, whose name is Jesus the Lord!
 - i. It is interesting to note that Jesus never once speaks directly of hope. The word “hope” appears 75 times in the NT, 63 times out of the mouth of Saint Paul. Jesus’ silence on the question is obvious because He is the reason for Christian hope. It is His life, Death and Resurrection that is the foundation of all hope.
 - ii. St. Paul describes hope always in terms of his sufferings. He says that hope gave him the strength to endure sufferings because God can be trusted to keep His word. Paul trusted that God could be believed and that Paul’s destiny would be to share God’s glory! Such hope is reasonable, trustworthy and does not disappoint.
 - iii. Christian Hope is a theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our only true happiness and gives us the

strength to do what is necessary, with trust, to receive this great gift because we trust Christ's promises to us.

- c. So we must ask, how can we keep your eyes fixed on heaven when we see so much evil, are so confused, angry or experience the deep wounds of sin? Saint Augustine can help us in this regard. He once taught, "Hope has two beautiful daughters: their names are anger and courage. Anger at the way things are and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are."
 - i. Righteous anger can help us recognize what is sinful in our midst. However, such anger needs to be directed and channeled into action. Otherwise, it can lead consume a person and cause enduring pain.
 - ii. Our anger must help us confront evil in our midst, seek the protection of the angels in the spiritual battles before us and to seek true reparation for our sins, foster healing for survivors of abuse and seek conversion of our minds and hearts.
 - iii. Anger must lead to courage inspired by the grace of the Holy Spirit to effect change. For what is divinely revealed cannot change. What is human and sinful must change. Such action must also hold accountable those responsible for keeping silent regarding this evil, no matter who they are.
- d. On a deeply personal level, this moment in the life of the Church also invites us "to walk the inner road to our hearts." For if we wish to channel our anger properly and to seek effective change, we need to remember that there is a more fundamental reality that links our anger and courage. It is their mother-the gift of hope.

IV. The Foundation for our Hope

- a. Story of Peter's Death: Palm Sunday Morning, 1987
 - i. The day started like any other morning. I was at breakfast early because it was Palm Sunday and the start of Holy Week and as sacristan at the seminary, there was a busy day ahead!
 - 1. Four other seminarians were sacristans....one was Peter
 - ii. Peter was my classmate who did not have the easiest time in the seminary. Yet, he persevered because he believed in his heart that God was calling him to priesthood and was determined to answer the call.
- b. This fateful day, Peter began our breakfast with a strange comment; "*Frank, I can't feel one side of my face. Do you think it is serious?*"
 - i. I was only half listening, busy with the details of the day. I muttered some answer. I told him perhaps he had slept the wrong way, or caught a cold. I assured him that there was no need to worry.

- c. Peter's second comment caused me to stop dead in my tracks: He said, "Frank, if anything happens to me, will you give my parents a letter that I have written." I was astonished and unprepared for the question or to answer it. So, I dismissed it, telling him we could discuss it later (in the hope that he would forget about so morbid and depressing a request). But Peter knew better. Unknown to me, he wrote the letter and gave it to the spiritual director of the seminary who read it to the entire congregation at Peter's funeral five weeks later
 - d. what we were soon to learn was that Peter had contracted a violent form of cancer, at the base of his brain, that could not be stopped. He was well enough to be ordained a deacon with the class, although he had difficulty prostrating himself. By priesthood retreat, he was mostly in bed, consoling us (and not the other way around)! He was too sick to be ordained at the Cathedral but became a priest of Jesus Christ in the Hospital...so weak that he was unable to celebrate the entire Mass. He died the day I was ordained a priest: May 16, 1987
 - e. I and my classmates were torn apart during these weeks. We asked how could this be happening? How could someone who wanted to serve the Lord be repaid in such a way? For the first few weeks, it was a time of many questions with few answers. However, during these weeks, Peter was experiencing a profound grace. Two weeks before his ordination and 19 days before his death, he proudly revealed his new prayer card to us: "For to me Life is Christ and death is gain".
 - f. When I saw his new prayer card, I sat there in utter silence. For I saw with my own eyes the power of Christian hope. Peter believed in the words and promises of Jesus. He had true hope in the power of Christ and His redemptive death. And upon Peter's death, I believe with my all my heart that the Lord set Peter, his priest, free!
- V. Peter's death showed me the true root for all hope can be found in the face of great suffering, pain and impending death. All hope is born at the foot of the Cross of Jesus Christ, for those who seek a living, personal relationship with Christ. For it is before the Cross that the love of Christ is most clear.
- i. The Cross is the place where every believer can sit in silent wonder and gratitude and learn a great lesson. For in an age when we have domesticated the power of the Cross, we need to remember the witness of the early Church. They "sang their way to death" because they had hope in the power of Christ to conquer all things.
 - ii. I invite you to consider the power of the Cross. Let us meditate upon the suffering of the Innocent One, the mental anguish he endured as he took on the sins of the whole world, the abandonment he freely

accepted and His choice to love us to the end. If hope is the trust we have that our ultimate desire for life and glory will be met, the doors of that glory are opened on the cross.

- iii. The Cross is the place where we can relearn the lessons that give fire to our hope in our daily life. It was Saint Thomas Aquinas who taught that if you or I were the only person who ever lived, Jesus would have died just for us.
 - 1. On the Cross, we see the great act of divine love that takes upon itself and forgives the sins of the world, opens the power of the Holy Spirit and creates us into the new People of God. It is a divine love that we cannot merit, earn, or ever deserve.
 - 2. Before the Cross we also recognize that we are “beloved sinners” and can acknowledge our own sinfulness in a spirit of repentance.
 - a. As AA teaches those in recovery: “you are only as sick as your secrets. The time has come to end all secrets and to acknowledge our sins.
 - 3. Before the Cross, we will find the strength to forgive others. For true forgiveness has little to do with our emotions. Rather, forgiveness is an act of the will that is graced by God’s divine power. We can choose to forgive another person for his/her own sake, not condoning their bad actions but at the same time, choosing to give them an opportunity to start again.
 - 4. Before the Cross, we also can learn to forgive ourselves. In my experience, the greatest challenge that many people must face, especially young people, is to confront the mistaken conclusion that they are neither loved or loveable. The truth is that we have infinite worth in the eyes of God.
- b. As we stand before the Cross of Christ, we can trust God’s word that he will lead us through every challenge, give us strength to root out every evil in our midst, endure whatever it takes to seek new life for ourselves and our community and that we will never suffer in vain. This is true hope which we are asked, in this hour of great challenge, to seek and live as disciples of the Lord
 - i. Story of St. Peter and the earthquake
 - 1. My mother’s question: Why did I call you Francis?
 - a. “Go and rebuild God’s Church”
 - 2. We are experiencing a spiritual earthquake and we must work together to rebuild the Church, one living stone at a time.

- VI. With all due respect to Saint Augustine, I believe that there is a third daughter that comes from hope. It is the gift of Joy.
- a. The daughter of “joy” is badly misunderstood in the modern world because it is confused with another gift in life- the experience of happiness. It is joy that wishes to come to us in the hour of even our greatest pains and struggles.
 - b. For many people, there is no difference between the gift of Joy and the gift of happiness. However, they are not the same.
 - i. Happiness is very important to Americans. In the Declaration of Independence, we hear that we have right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” is our right.
 1. What then is happiness? It is the transitory state of life when all is going well at any given moment in my life. It is a feeling of contentment that shuns all suffering and pain.
 2. The problem with happiness is that it never lasts because it is dependent upon external circumstances over which I have no control. The result is that the pursuit of happiness is very frustrating!!! Worse still, we can easily become consumed with the pursuit of things that bring happiness, especially material things or pleasure itself.
 - a. In the words of Anthony DeMello, the root of many addictions comes when our possessions, desires and wants possess us. An unbridled search for happiness can easily lead to addiction.
 3. Bishop Barron, in “The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path”, reminds us that the Beattitudes are a roadmap to find the true center of our Life and rediscover “Makarios” which he defines as “lucky”. He redefines some of the Beattitudes as follows:
 - a. “How blessed are you who are poor” = “How lucky you are if you are not addicted to material things.”
 - b. “How blessed are you who weep now” = “How lucky you are if you are not addicted to good feelings.”
 - c. “How happy are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you and defame you on account of the Son of Man” = “How lucky you are if you are not addicted to the approval of others.”
 - d. When we are so “lucky” and “free”, we can be surprised by joy!
 - ii. Christian joy is very different from happiness. Joy is a deep and abiding sense of contentment that arises from one’s relationship with God. It is a divine gift that helps us to celebrate the belief that in the end, all of life will be find its true peace in Christ alone. In the words of

Saint Juliana of Norwich, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

1. Joy is never dependent upon the external circumstances of life. It does not require possessions, success, or any pleasure at all. Joy remains even when we suffer because we have only Jesus to whom we can turn who is always there! Such joy is so deep an emotion that words and thoughts cannot fully express it, except in tears.
- c. My friends, hope gives rise to joy because it leads us to the foundation of what we desire. Joy is the realization that the gift we seek is ours and no one can take it away from us- a joy that flows from love that God revealed in Jesus. Those who embrace the cross of Christ will always and forever be surprised by the power of this great gift and they will renew the face of the world!

VII. Conclusion:

- a. Story: the article in the Wall Street Journal that asked the question about the movie Paul, Apostle of Christ: how could Christianity have gone from 5,000 members in 70 AD to 23,000,000 members in 312 AD.
 - i. What were the two elements that brought growth to the Church?
 1. Heroic Joyful witness
 2. True authentic community
 - a. Both were not possible centuries ago without true hope
 - b. Both remain possible for those who are willing to rediscover the power of hope and to allow the Church to be renewed, one person at a time.