

**Proclamation and Action:
A Renewed Commitment
Johannes Hofinger Conference
New Orleans, Louisiana
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INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin with a true story about a little boy with Down's Syndrome. He must have had a wonderful catechist. He came from catechism one day and posed a very difficult question to his mom. He asked, "Mom, before I was born, and I was inside of you, did you know that I had Down's Syndrome?" The mother, with some hesitancy, said, "Yes, I did son." The son pressed another question, "Mom, did you want me to be born with Down's Syndrome?" This time the mom really hesitated and she finally said, "No son, I did not want you to be born with Down's Syndrome." To this he responded, "Well, God wanted me to be born with Down's Syndrome."

He asked yet a third question, "Mom, when I get to heaven, will I have Down's Syndrome?" Again, the mother was perplexed and she said, "No son, you will not have Down's Syndrome in heaven, you will be a perfect person." The son responded, "Mom, I don't think that is correct, I think I will have Down's Syndrome in heaven because that is who I am. If I don't have Down's Syndrome, how will God recognize me?"

There are several things we can learn from this story, especially those of us who are involved in the ministry of the Word of God. As I said, this little boy must have had a great catechist, one who knew how to speak to a given situation and to this little boy in particular and in the reality of his handicapped life. The catechist was able to touch his heart and assure him of God's love, and that made all the difference.

Furthermore, by affirming him as he was, the catechist taught him to live happily in the way God created him. The child received a lesson for life; that lesson changed his life forever.

We notice one more thing, he was anxious to share what he had learned and experienced in his catechesis. Successful catechesis is when the catechized begin to catechize. That is, when the person catechized is desirous to share his or her faith experience, then whoever did the catechizing did a good job.

DEEPENING THE COMMITMENT

Good catechists are interested in growing in their ability to catechize and this means an ever-present desire to deepen our commitment to proclaim God's truth and to act ever more justly. We have been called to hand on a living faith, one that continues the unique way of living as disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ.

The challenge of commitment was very strong in the mind and heart of the man after whom this conference was named, that is Fr. Johannes Hofinger, S.J. I knew Fr. Hofinger, and I had the privilege of working with him for several months when I was a young priest working in a family catechetical program in Mexico. One of his phrases, when referring to sacramental preparation was, "You can have commitment without ritual, but we must never have ritual without commitment." In other words, rituals, such as sacraments in and of themselves without a commitment on the part of those receiving the sacraments, are not complete.

In Mexico Fr. Hofinger found a unique challenge. The people there were practically all baptized and most had received the other sacraments; moreover he saw how much they were immersed in popular religiosity, with rich and frequent rituals and traditions. He recognized how important it was to evangelize and catechize a Church already overwhelmingly sacramentalized.

My task today is to speak precisely about commitment, an absolutely essential element in the life of the disciples of Jesus Christ. Many of the people to whom we bring the Word of God, like the

ones in Latin America, have received the sacraments. Our ministry aims at deepening their faith and in this way, contribute to their on-going conversion.

The commitment of which I speak is the response to the Word of God; it is decision of the will and the carrying out of that decision that makes us clear disciples of Jesus Christ. In the dynamic of the faith experience, we move from listening to the Word of God, allowing us to be embraced by it by surrendering ourselves to it, entrusting ourselves, as it were, to it. St. Ignatius of Antioch said it this way: “I commend myself to the Gospel as to Jesus Christ.”

After taking the Word into the depth of our being, into the heart of our hearts, it becomes life-giving, as well as the guiding light for our lives. If the Word of God has become part of us, then it will be lived out. If it has not been implanted in us, we cannot exemplify the Christ we profess to believe. What this means for us involved in the ministry of the Word is that we do not simply communicate truths or teach doctrine; we must live our faith so our listeners will believe and *practice* their faith.

COMMITMENT TO RESPOND IN SCRIPTURE

Several weeks ago the Synod on the Word God took place. We are waiting for the Apostolic Exhortation from the synod. It should be an extraordinary one since the Synod, from all indications, was an outstanding event. The message of the Synod Fathers said this about the word of God:

“The word of God, in fact, is “sweeter also than honey or drippings from the comb” (Ps. 19:11), “your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path” (Ps. 119:105), but is also “like fire, says the Lord, like a hammer shattering rock” (Jer. 23:29). It is like the rain that irrigates the earth, fertilizes it and makes it spring forth, and in doing this, he makes the aridity of our spiritual desert flourish (cf. Is. 55:10-11). But it is also “living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

This vivid description of the nature and power of the Word of God applies well to the challenge of commitment.

The challenge to commit oneself as Christ's disciple is expressed in Sacred Scripture in plain language: "Whoever says, "I know him," but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, the love of God is truly perfected in him. This is the way we may know that we are in union with him; whoever claims to abide in him ought to live (just) as he lived" (1 Jn. 2: 4-6).

An equally challenging scriptural text is found in Matthew 25: 25:31: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory.... He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.'"

In this text Jesus identifies with the excluded and forgotten, and whoever reaches out to these, they will be reaching out to him.

St. Paul, whose jubilee year we celebrate this year, is a model *par excellence* of all disciples and missionaries. This is especially shown in his words of introduction to the Romans: "Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God,...the gospel about his Son, ...to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name..." (Rom. 1: 1-5).

St. Paul uses the same word that appears frequently in the New Testament. The English translation usually says, "servant," but the original Greek word is *doulos*, meaning slave.

It happens to be the same word Jesus uses when he says he has been sent to serve and not to be served: "But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be

your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20: 26-28).

But if we want to know how specifically we are to respond to God’s word, we go to the verse from Micah that inspired one of the themes of this conference:

“You have been told, O man, what is good,
and what the LORD requires of you:
Only to do right and to love goodness,
and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8).

In other words we are to not simply act, but to act JUSTLY. We will come back to this later in this talk.

Jesus became incarnate and just that one divine initiative shows us God’s way of teaching us about his love. He becomes one of us and walks with us, eats with us, suffers with us, and shares our tears as well as our joys. By living among us, he is able to tell us about God’s love on our terms. He meets us where we are, as he did the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, the hungry crowds who were miraculously fed, and the way he taught the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He always met people where they were, and understood their immediate circumstance.

To summarize, Jesus’ disciples are called to love our neighbor, to serve, especially the Word of God, to be compassionate with those who suffer and act justly in all we do. If the Biblical call to commitment sounds radical, well, it is. The cost of discipleship is the total giving of oneself in a surrender to God’s will, as Jesus exemplified in his last words on the eve of his death, “Not my will, but yours be done, O Lord” (Lk. 22:42).

FROM THE HERE AND NOW TO ACTION

In the past 50 years there have been five general bishops' conferences. Those held in Medellin (1968), Puebla (1979), and Aparecida (2007), employed the methodology used in many of the texts of the Second Vatican Council, for example, *Gaudium et Spes*. This was the famous "See-Judge-Act" approach that was popular in Europe between World Wars I and II through the efforts of Cardinal Cardijn. This method first takes into consideration the reality of the here and now, proceeds to see that reality in the light of the Word of God, and these two steps lead to specific action to be taken. This process assures that the virtue of prudence is observed and this virtue allows us to make the best decision for action given the needs at hand.

The process of see-judge-act can be useful for handing on the faith, first of all, because it takes into consideration the situation in which our people are living. When we present the Word of God, it has to be relevant to their present needs and the questions they are at this time in their lives asking. Sometimes the lesson plan we have prepared may not fit. Remember our catechesis is meant for people, not people for our catechesis. We may have to chuck our beautiful plan and deal with the questions at hand.

We may be called to present the Word of God to professional people and their families. We may be asked to serve the Word of God to people of the working classes and their children. We may be called to bring the Good News, as Jesus was, to the poor. Some of you may be presenting God's message of love to the handicapped, the imprisoned or to those in the military. I suspect that more and more ministers of the word find themselves in front of a very multi-cultural group of people, and this requires special skills, such as "cultural competency." In every case, the Gospel of love and the Gospel of challenge has to be given with joy and without fear, trusting that the Word of God carries with it its own authority and power.

ACTING JUSTLY

But in all cases we have to remember that the end result is not just understanding, but commitment to action. This action is both personal and communal. We are called to act as individuals and also as Church. Here is where the challenge of acting justly comes in. Christianity is more than being respectable people.

I asked a group of fourth graders once what did it mean to live as Christians? The answer I received was, “Being nice.” Yes, we should be nice, but sometimes we are called to stand for justice, announce the good news, but also denounce the bad news, the unjust and immoral things going on around us. We may be judged as not being nice, but we need to stand for the principles and values inherent in the Gospel and continually present in our Catholic tradition, such as compassion, justice, truth, peace and solidarity with all who suffer.

What is the Church called to do in our time? And when I say Church, I include all of us individuals who make up the Body of Christ. Our response received its cue from the “signs of the times.” Some of these signs are the “isms” in which our contemporary society is immersed: secularism, materialism, hedonism, and individualism.

Our society is beset by addictions, violence, and the recent attention to financial irresponsibility which has hurt so many defenseless individuals and charitable organizations. We continue to face unequal opportunities for health care, higher education and housing. Our country continues to face an intractable and scandalous problem of immigration. Undocumented immigrants live in the shadows of our cities and towns. Thousands are separated from their families, husbands from wives, children from parents, brothers and sisters from each other.

Most Catholics believe we as Church should be supportive of all immigrants, documented or not. In the coming months we should support the bishops and others who will be advocating for comprehensive immigration reform. This is a touchy issue, so was the Viet Nam War and the Civil

Rights movement. Not far from here is a community, a small town, where the majority of the people were Catholics. Most are not anymore because when they saw priests and women religious marching in support of civil rights, they left the Church. What is greatly needed is education for justice, a theme that has long been around in our Catholic tradition.

There is a Christian urgency to take action from our vantage point to do what we can to change the world around us. In Mexico the people learned a catch-all phrase to refer to the Christian responsibility to work for the common good, “*hacer el mundo más hermoso y a la gente más feliz,*” that is, how can we make the world more beautiful and people happier. The Church cannot be quiet while people are suffering the pains of injustice and exclusion. As we have heard it said, “we must do as Jesus did: proclaim the good news and denounce the bad news of injustice and violence.”

We are all shocked and horrified that our financial leaders in our banks and in Wall Street have failed to maintain a stable economy because of greed and lust for money. They have failed to consider the common good and that we are all stewards of what God has given us, and that justice has a part to play in every facet of our society. There is an urgent need that the moral imperative of the Gospel be planted in every conscience of every business person and in all professional fields.

It is good that many of us march for life, for example, and express our abhorrence at the horrible violence inflicted on the unborn. Yet, we must go further and support the pregnant teenager, or poor parent who has to struggle to raise a child with little. We must be ready to assist all poor children and their parents by sacrificing from what we have to help provide food, housing, healthcare and education.

DISCIPLES AND MISSIONARIES

Those of us who have been called to the ministry of the Word of God are both disciples and missionaries. Discipleship and mission were the overall theme of the Fifth General Conference of

Latin American Bishops held in Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007. I was privileged to attend as part of the U.S. delegation. What was repeated over and over again at the conference and in the final document was that all disciples are missionaries; that is, we cannot be followers of Jesus Christ without also proclaiming his truth.

When we are convinced about the gospel, when we are really convinced about the gospel, then we will naturally be motivated to claim it. Think of when you see a beautiful sunset. You are immediately caught up by its beauty and automatically say to those around you, “look at that, isn’t that nice?” The same thing is to be said about Jesus. If I come to the realization that he loves me, that he forgives me, that he gave his life for me, then I will be compelled to point to Jesus on the cross and say, “Look at him - he is the one who loves me, he is the one who forgives me, he is the one who died for me.”

I believe that the word “witness” expresses both concepts of discipleship and mission. Witness has to do with the way we live, which should always point to the person of Jesus Christ. We are not really “examples,” rather we are witnesses to Jesus. We do not set up ourselves as exemplars of Christian living, we simply reflect Jesus or, put another way, our lives should be so transparent that Jesus can be seen in what we say and do. We have all heard that a picture speaks a thousand words but it is even truer that actions speak louder than words.

There are two indispensable tools that we use in our catechizing, one is Sacred Scripture and the other is the catechism. Whether we think of the Bible or the catechism, both are just printed words and as such are dead unless we give them life. What good does it do us to memorize scripture or catechisms if we do not live out their message?

Pope John Paul II writing on catechesis says, “It aims at developing understanding of the mystery of Christ in the light of God’s word, so that the whole of a person’s humanity is impregnated by that love.”

The Pope goes on to say, “Changed by the working of Grace into a new creature, the Christian thus sets himself to follow Christ and learns more and more within the Church to think like him, to judge like him, to act in conformity to his commandments, and to hope as he invites us to do. As we grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, he becomes the center and Lord of our lives. From our rising in the morning to our retiring in the evening, Jesus is always on our minds.”

It is true that God is a judge. And we tend to portray him with the symbol of the scales of justice. Yet the justice for which he stands transcends our human and civil idea. God being the perfect judge is completely unbiased, and with Him mercy triumphs over justice.

A friend of mine, Mr. Allen Sanchez, State Director of the New Mexico Catholic Bishops’ Conference, says that Jesus the Judge leaves his bench and takes the witness stand and there he testifies to God’s love. This realization should move us to ourselves becoming witnesses and own the suffering of those around us. Mother Teresa used to say that true love is not a feeling, but rather a decision to accept the full implications of loving, especially the person who suffers.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) gives valuable insights to those who are servants of the Word of God. To communicate effectively, he says, one must: teach, delight, and persuade.

Catechesis has to do with handing on the truths of Jesus Christ. The catechist must know the truth. This requires a thorough study of the truths that we are being asked to hand on. Perhaps some think that in presenting hearers with what is true, expressed clearly and accurately, one has done enough. But when we are communicating faith, more is needed. One who hands on the faith cannot simply announce the truth, for he or she wants to move hearers to love. This is, as we know, the

desired outcome, as we are taught in the Gospel: to kindle in the hearer's hearts love for God and neighbor, and this is done by presenting the story of God's love for us.

St. Augustine goes on to say that the teacher of faith, in order to hold the hearer's attention, has to delight the hearer. It is not enough for the catechist to simply say the truth, the catechist must lead hearers to want to listen to the truth. What this means for me is that the truth we teach has to be presented as attractively and as interestingly as possible, using appropriate examples and stories.

What we attempt to do in catechesis is not only a truth to be grasped by the intellect but also something treasured in the heart and something to be done. In other words, what we teach has to be put across in such a way that action follows. St. Augustine says, "It is the duty of eloquent catechists, when they are trying to persuade the people to act in a certain way, not only to teach them in order to instruct them; not only to delight, in order to hold them; but also to sway, in order to conquer and win them." The teacher of faith must know the truth that he or she seeks to communicate, present it in a way that will attract and hold the hearer's attention, and energize and inspire the hearer to act on what he or she has heard.

The most intriguing advice that St. Augustine gives catechists is taken from 2 Corinthians 9:7, which is often translated, "God loves a cheerful giver." Cheerfulness might be better translated following St. Augustine as "enthusiasm" or "enjoyment." The teacher of faith has to be enthusiastic and enjoy what he or she is doing. This is an essential quality and if it isn't there, the faith will probably not be communicated. Things that might take away from enthusiasm are tiredness, discouragement, or a "What's the use?" attitude. St. Augustine says we should not focus on our own feelings but concentrate on our hearers. This can make all the difference.

The joy that St. Augustine refers to comes from the love that one has for what we want to hand on and the love for those to whom we are handing it on.

The way one ends a talk or a paper often emphasizes a point. This how I would like to end this talk: you ministers and servants of the word are among the most important people in the Church. You hand on the faith. What the Church will be fifty or a hundred years from now, depends on what we now, in this generation, do to hand on the faith. What we received we now give, and what we now give is the greatest investment we can make for the life of the Church many years from now. Strive to become better at what you do. What you instill in the hearts of young and old will make all the difference in their lives. What you teach is important, but how you do it is as equally important. Remember how St. Paul in his hymn of love in 1 Cor. 13 says: "Love...rejoices in the truth." Both St. Augustine and St. Paul are on to the same thing. The truth that we proclaim must be done in love, love for the person of Jesus whom we teach, and love for those with whom we share his message. Add to this your joy, the indispensable ingredient in all catechesis. You are the angels, the messengers who are given the task to announce "tidings of great joy!" How can it be received with joy if it is not given with joy? Love the truth you hand on, love those to whom you hand it on, and rejoice, again I say, rejoice!