

**SOWERS OF GOD'S PEACE**  
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**Keynote Address at the Ministry Formation Day**  
**Fort Worth, Texas**  
**January 10, 2004**

“It’s a great day to be a Catholic!”

Last Sunday you all went to Mass. You prayed with your fellow parishioners; you were led in song by the cantors and the choir; you may have ushered, served or read from the Lectionary, or given communion. You may have even heard a reasonably good homily. All this was not what you, of my generation, would have experienced in our childhood and youth. This generation of Catholics is enjoying the fruits of the twentieth century pastoral visionaries and theologians.

You, the pastoral leaders of the Church of Fort Worth, hold in high regard the ministry you exercise in you diocese and in your parishes. You teach, you counsel, you lead prayer and worship, you offer your wisdom in the everyday life of your parish, you help in raising the money needed to continue the work of the Church, you visit the sick, the imprisoned and the troubled.

It isn’t just a priest thing or a sister thing anymore; it’s everybody’s task. This didn’t just start to happen yesterday out of the blue. There was a lot of planting of seeds, many building blocks that were set and many sweat, tears and toil to pave the road that led us to where we are now. And this conference is a celebration of all that and, of course, that your local Church of Fort Worth is alive by God’s word and God’s spirit, not for its sake alone, but for the life of the world around it.

The story that tells us how we came to be where we are now begins with seeds sown many decades ago, certainly in the nineteenth century. But let us not go that far back -- let's just go a mere sixty or so years ago. The pope then was Pius XII. He had a friend who became his confessor. His name was Cardinal Bea, a Jesuit, knowledgeable of Bible and passionate about ecumenism. The Cardinal's brother Jesuits wondered why it took so long to hear the Pope's confession every Saturday afternoon. No doubt deep and wonderful conversations took place between this wise Cardinal and this equally wise pope.

Those conversations bore fruit in encyclicals that proved to be important seeds for the Second Vatican Council: "The Mystical Body of Christ," on the Church as the Body of Christ, promulgated on June 29, 1943; "Divino Afflante Spiritu," that opened the doors for Catholic biblical scholarship, promulgated on September 30, 1943; and "Mediator Dei," on the priesthood, including the priesthood of the faithful, promulgated on Nov. 20, 1947.

At the same time the Spirit was at work in the liturgical and the catechetical movements in the Church. Meetings on how to hand on the gospel message and celebrate Christ's mysteries were taking place around the world. These gatherings energized catechists and liturgists with new and fresh ideas. Actually they were not so new, for they went back to the Church of the Apostles and to the first centuries of the Church, and how the early Christians went about spreading the Good News of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ and how they worshipped. In the 1940's and 1960's theologians and pastoralists would meet, exchange ideas and together lay the foundations and human relationships that led up to the exciting moments of Vatican II.

The Council answered these questions, among others: "What is the Church?" "Who makes up the Church and how is it organized?" "What are the roles of lay people, religious, priests and bishops?" "Why are liturgy, and especially baptism and Eucharist, so essential and

primary?” “Where does the Church get its truth?” And, “How does the Church relate to the world?”

The story of Vatican II needs to be told and retold to the present generations and those to come; for we can never take for granted the persons and ideas that shaped the expression of the Church of our time.

A key chapter in the story of Vatican II is how the Pastoral Constitution, “The Church in the Modern World” came to be written. It wasn’t even supposed to be considered, but once the Council Fathers decided there would be a document on the inner life and nature of the Church, it was logical that they would also consider a document that would relate the Church to the world.

Recently I met a permanent deacon. He related to me how he became a Catholic. He had been a preacher in the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Since he converted, several years ago, his family has disowned him and considers him dead. I asked him why he had become a Catholic. He said that so much of evangelical Protestant preaching is “apocalyptic,” that is, it focuses on heaven and hell and that his world is totally evil and that it must be shunned. He said he was attracted to the Roman Catholic Church because of its teachings on justice and peace. The world, after all, is redeemable, isn’t that why “God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten Son”?

This man is now a powerful preacher in the Catholic Church.

Again, I say, “It’s a good day to be a Catholic!”

What the Church stands for fits the time. What we have to offer as Church is what the world needs right now. And what the world needs is what the world needs: coming together for the common good; understanding each other with respect; and going back to the source, the original gospel inspiration of peace and justice, and sowing its seeds here and now, and allowing it to be fertilized, hydrated and nurtured by the promised grace of the Holy Spirit.

That's why I say, "It's a good day to be a Catholic!"

The peace of Jesus Christ is *shalom*, a Hebrew word that means not only the absence of war and violence, nor does it connote a balance of power between opposing forces. It is not the peace that arises out of a despot's iron rule.

Peace is the effect of justice; it is the fruit of the right ordering of things according to the design of God. It comes from respect people to each other. As Benito Juárez, a famous historical figure in the history of Mexico, said it, "*El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz,*" (Peace comes from the respect we have to the other.)

Peace is also the fruit of love, for "love goes beyond what justice can ensure." Christ is the prince of peace, having reconciled all people to God by the cross. There he restored the unity of humankind and poured out the Holy Spirit of love and peace into our hearts.

For the individual the *shalom* of Christ includes the positive ingredients of total well being, wholeness, healing, having it all together in mind, body and spirit. Together with the gift of the Spirit comes the gift of peace. On the first Easter, the Risen Jesus appeared to the apostles, "Peace be with you"...when he had said this, he breathed on them and said, 'receive the Holy Spirit'" (Jn. 20, 21-22).

His peace is our challenge. The promise and gift of peace is something we must all work together to achieve. The gospel is the road map for peace; the mission of the Church is to be the catalyst and the model for peace. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."

No other organization has articulated the cause for peace as coherently and as consistently as the Catholic Church has done in recent times.

This makes me say once more, "It's a good day to be a Catholic!"

You and I have always lived in wartime. Our country has been involved in several major wars in our lifetimes: World War II, the Korean conflict, Viet Nam, the Persian Gulf War, the war in Iraq. Our troops have been involved in other, not as well remembered, wars and revolutions in the Dominican Republic, Chile, Panama, the Balkans, Nigeria, Somalia, the Philippines, Afghanistan, etc. We have learned a lot of geography.

The message and challenge of peace has been articulated by the Church in dramatic and hitherto unspoken eloquence, with a prophetic sense of urgency. Remember the famous address of Paul VI before the United Nations: “War, never again, war!”

In 2003 we celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the encyclical, *Pacem In Terris* of Pope John XXIII. It may be the most important encyclical of the twentieth century. It was written in the middle of the Cold War and in the context of the Cuban missile crisis. Its importance lies in that it brought to center stage the issue of human rights and that these are founded on the sacredness of the human person.

Part of the genius of the encyclical lies in pointing to the gap that marks advanced industrial societies and Christian principles. What John XXIII said then applies now: “it happens in many quarters and too often that there is no proportion between scientific training and religious instruction. The former continues and is extended until it reaches higher degrees, while the latter remains at an elementary level” (no. 153).

Isn't this one of the glaring pastoral imperatives of our day? In the past forty years since *Pacem in Terris* was written, Catholics have increased in number, influence and presence in every area of U.S. society and culture. Today Catholics hold important positions in politics, law, the media, corporate life, unions and higher education. Catholics play key roles in decision

making in public life. With few exceptions there is an abiding gap between secular skills and the ability to apply moral and religious principles to secular knowledge.

The encyclical reminds us of the pastoral ideal of the formation of adult faith, and the urgent need to bring Catholics to an intellectual and moral integration of their faith for the sake of effective witness.

This urgent need to form the minds and consciences of adult disciples has to rate among the highest pastoral concerns in the U.S. Church today. We have our work cut out for us.

What a challenge this is! Yeah, “It’s a good day to be a Catholic!”

Last year we also commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter, “The Challenge of Peace.” Its pastoral purpose was to provide a framework for the formation of conscience of citizens, military personnel and public officials.

Today we face an entirely different scenario with the events of September 11, continued terrorism and the war in Iraq. We are faced with war involving not only Nation states, but also individuals waging war independently. These new realities demand a new application of such principles as just cause, proper authority and just means.

The Church celebrated the twentieth-fifth anniversary of Pope John Paul II last year. He has been such a spectacular pope and has had such an important role in world events, that he will probably be known in the future as “John Paul the Great.” His message has been above all world peace. He has consistently taught that in Christ we find the ultimate and complete expression of what it means to be human. You and I have been privileged to live during his time as pope.

“It’s a good day to be a Catholic!”

The dream and the hope is that: in Iraq, the Holy Land, Colombia, North and South Korea, Ireland, Chiapas, gangland U.S.A., our homes and schools there will be peace.

We are called to be peacemakers, diocesan peacemakers, parish peacemakers, and household peacemakers. Actually we are called to be sowers of peace anywhere we are. Without attempting to be all-inclusive, I would like to mention a few issues with sowing seeds of peace in our diocesan and parish communities.

1) We must all pray fervently and earnestly for peaceful relations between bishops and priests. The sex abuse scandal over which we have all anguished, has damaged the bishop-priest bond. The healing that is to take place demands the efforts of all of us together. We bishops need your prayerful help in having the wisdom to deal with hurting priests and that we have among us the spirit of brotherly love that is supposed to characterize our relationship.

2) There is a need for peace between us clerics and our parishioners. We all stand in need of regaining trust for effective and credible leadership. Again, this is a task for all of us to work on together.

3) Cardinal Bernardin's call for dialogue through the Common Ground Initiative was a brilliant stroke of genius. Only Cardinal Bernardin could have begun such a project. Unfortunately, because of his untimely death, the Initiative has lost some of its original excitement. Nonetheless, I can assure you that the Initiative continues and has established models whereby pastoral leaders, Catholic theologians, and philosophers can come together to dialogue and establish the common ground of our faith in Jesus Christ.

4) Someone told me, and I am inclined to agree, that the top three pastoral issues facing the Church today are: the need for more priests, pastoral ministry among Hispanics, and finding ways to educate adult disciples. The issue of Hispanic ministry is indeed important if we are to have an all-inclusive Church that welcomes everyone, including new immigrants. Hispanics are now the largest minority group in the country and are the largest ethnic group in

U.S. Catholicism. By the year 2050, the U.S. Hispanic population is expected to reach 96.5 million, almost 25 percent of the total U.S. population. By 2010, half of all Catholics in the U.S. will be Hispanic. Andrew Greeley's sociological research has shown that some 60,000 U.S. Hispanics leave Catholicism every year. As is well known, most of these become Protestant Pentecostals. How are we sowing seeds not only to keep Hispanic Catholics but how to recognize their rich faith and their leadership potential in the Church?

5) The seeds of peace are sown in our task of handing on the faith, through religious education, either in our schools or in other parish programs, the RCIA, small faith sharing groups, Bible study, preaching, and writing. The crisis today is how we make sure that all of these efforts are effective in forming an authentic Christian moral conscience and a correct understanding of the Catholic faith.

A bishop is called to hand down the tradition of the Church. *Tradition* is not just a body of doctrine handed on unchangingly from generation to generation. Tradition is not a dead document but the Spirit alive among us. Sacred Scripture and tradition have to be applied to the changing situations of different times. Remember that tradition comes from the Latin *traditio*, which means the handing over, the Holy Spirit, the Breath of Jesus for the life of the Church and the world. The words of Jesus have to be reapplied over and over again as new issues arise. An example of this is cloning and other new biological proposals.

6) Consultation. Peace in our parishes involves participation of our parishioners through our consultative bodies such as parish pastoral councils and parish finance councils. One thing that has come out of the sexual abuse crisis is the people's demand to be involved in the decision-making in the Church. They want to have, and rightly so, a say in how parishes are run, what priorities are established, and how their money is spent. Any efforts you make in

creating effective consultative bodies will mean for a deeper sense of community, or *communio*, in our parishes.

7) A challenge of our time is how to relate discipleship with patriotism. Love of country is a virtue that we must nurture. Nonetheless, patriotism includes a critical stance on the part of citizens. This election year provides an excellent opportunity to educate our people on the need for principles of discipleship to be the foundation of all our decisions, even those having to do with how we vote. A criticism that I sometimes hear is that many of our brother and sister Catholics are first Democrats or Republicans and then somewhere down the line they are Catholic. At your disposal is the new document *Faithful Citizenship*, issued by the bishops in November as a guide for Catholics in the coming elections.

8) Liturgy issues. Some of the worst fights we have had since Vatican II have been over liturgy. The changes have shocked many, especially older Catholics. We have yet to resolve the arrangement of the furniture and Church architecture. There is also the huge area of language and translations. The discussion over what is inclusive language will continue for some time. A good place to start to resolve some of these issues is to explain to the people in the pews why certain changes are being made. We're good at telling people when to sit and when to stand, but where we fail is in providing the reason for changes.

9) Sexuality issues. On these I don't have solutions. I only want to put these out as issues dividing the Church today. Peter Steinfels says that Paul VI's encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* condemning artificial birth control was the Vietnam War of the Catholic Church. It seems that for the majority, this issue is a non-issue. It also appears that the Church lost credibility on its teaching on sexual morality in general. Yet we cannot deny that the Church has important things

to say about sexual morality, marriage, and what it means to be human. It is interesting to note that *Humanae Vitae* has never been declared an infallible teaching.

To this controversy can be added: The Church's teaching on abortion, homosexuality, and extra-marital sex. There are no easy solutions to the debates around these issues; and they will not go away. We will be dealing with these for a long time.

10) Women in the Church. We are familiar with the ordination debate, but there are interesting debates going on between masculine language and imagery stemming from a patriarchal tradition, and a feminine language and imagery. We must not dismiss them from theology as a passing fad, but recognize the existence in Sacred Scriptures of feminine imagery, as stated by the U.S. bishops in a 1990 document on inclusive language translation.

I congratulate you on the results of your synod as articulated in the document, "United in Faith." I read with excitement the common desire of the people of the Diocese of Fort Worth to cultivate the three virtues of gratitude, courage, and wisdom. These are an excellent framework for your pastoral plan.

I know that your thoughts here in Fort Worth often turn to your bishop, because of his illness. Your bishop and I have been very good friends over the years. We were appointed bishops at around the same time and have shared the good things we have done as a national conference and the difficult things we have had to face. I am sure that your appreciation for the office of bishop is very strong at this time. I hope you never lose that appreciation since the bishop, unworthily I might add, represents the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Let me quote from the prayer said at the ordination of a bishop: "It is through the bishop that the Lord is ever-present, through the bishop Christ himself never fails to proclaim the Gospel and to administer the sacraments, through the bishop's exercise of his duty as father, Christ himself adds new members

to his body, and through the bishop's wisdom and prudence, it is Christ himself who leads you in your earthly pilgrimage toward eternal happiness."

The scientific world is currently very excited over a spacecraft that landed safely on the planet Mars. Up to now, Mars has been looked at by many scientists as no longer active in the way it was, yet it still responds to orbital pulls and shoves with sheets of dirty water, ice, or snow that brings striking changes to the surface. According to the *National Geographic* "its capacity to change is no longer buried in the distant past. Mars is no longer a world of endless decline but one of rhythmic regeneration."

As we think of Mars, we might also think of the Church that some consider either as dead or in decline. We must remember that the Church's capacity for change is never buried in the past; it is constantly regenerated by the incredible power of the Holy Spirit. If Jesus promised the Spirit, then it must be so. It is through his Spirit that he is with us all days until the end. It is on this promise and on looking back to the Church's 2,000-year history and how it has regenerated itself that we can place our hope in this Church. This family of God, this unique gathering of women and men of every race and tongue belongs to God, and the Church is ours as stewards to care for it, keep it shining and life giving.

We must, at the same time, say that the Church is not here for itself alone, but for the sake of the world to be as Vatican II says, the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of all who are poor or afflicted in any way. I invite all of you to renew your efforts in sowing not only the seeds of peace, but also those of hope and joy.

"It's a great day to be a Catholic!"