

“THE POWER OF THE TRINITY IN THE WORLD AND IN OUR LIVES”

National Catholic Student Coalition Conference

Albuquerque, New Mexico - December 31, 1999

Welcome to New Mexico, the land of enchantment! In 1912 New Mexico finally became a state of the Union; it was the last of the forty-eight contiguous states to become a state. For sixty-two years officials of New Mexico had sought statehood, but it was thought in Washington that New Mexico was too dusty, too uncivilized and besides, most of the people here spoke Spanish. They thought we were too multi-cultural and multi-ethnic to become part of the United States. Now it is precisely those characteristics which give us our sense of pride.

Not far from here is the small town of Espanola, known for its hot enchiladas, low-riders and bad jokes. There you will find one of the most charming accents of the English language –next to that of the Texas drawl and Brooklynese!

Three men, a white, a black and a Chicano, are in a bar and a shapely blond walks in. They are immediately enthralled by her and keep eyeing her. Finally she walks over to them and says, “O.K., guys, I know you want to go out with me. Well, I can only go out with one of you. I will choose the one who can come up with the best sentence using the words, *liver* and *cheese*.”

The white man says, “I just love liver and cheese sandwiches!” She responds with disgust, “That’s gross. Is that the best you can do? Let’s see what the others have to say.”

The black man says, “I just hate liver and cheese sandwiches!” The blond shouts, “How awful! Your sentence is even worse than the first one!”

She turns to the Chicano, and he, looking at the other two men says, “Liver alone, cheese mine!” Guess who gets the blond, and guess where he’s from? From Espanola, of course!

You have asked me to speak of the Trinity, ministry, young adults and the Catholic Church. It's hard enough to speak on the Trinity itself. I will say what Cardinal Basil Hume said to us U.S. bishops when he began a sermon on God, "I am going to speak to you about something I do not know anything about!" I will do the best I can.

The subject of the Trinity can be approached very abstractly and somewhat removed from real life. Yet, as I will try to do in this talk, it is not all irrelevant to life and this very very significant moment in history, the entrance of your generation and mine to a new millennium of Jesus Christ. And let us be clear that the year 2000 is an eminently Christian moment. It celebrates the 2,000 years of the One sent by the Father; the 2,000 years of Jesus' grace, message and incalculable influence; 2,000 years of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the heart of the world, transforming it, in spite of human failure and resistance.

Today I would like to describe how the most basic of Christian teachings, that God is both one and three at the same time, challenges the world of today, perhaps now more than ever, given the opportunity we have on account of current technology, transnational and trans-oceanic travel and the vast planetary network of communications. The stage is set by divine providence and human ingenuity that we become ONE.

If there is any organization in the world that can spearhead and model the unification of people, it is the Roman Catholic Church. Why? Because of its global interconnectedness and ability to incorporate all cultures, language groups and work with, or at least, alongside most political systems.

Another reason is that we do have something to offer by way of an elaborated, consistent and clear social teaching that provides the structure for a just and peaceful world.

We have a sacramental system that unites us and that has its origin in the inner life of the

Most Blessed Trinity. We pray in all our worship gatherings: *to the Father, through the Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit*. We begin the Mass, the Eucharist –around the table where we are most one– “*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.*” We end the central prayer of the Eucharist: “*Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours almighty Father, forever and ever. Amen.*”

To come face to face with the mystery of the Trinity is an awesome encounter. It is really impossible to understand.

I remember little Johnny who had been prepared for first communion and had to be interviewed by the pastor. Little Johnny was an only child of a couple whom the pastor knew, but hadn't seen in several months. He asked Johnny the usual questions about God being one and the Three Persons in that one God. “How many Gods are there, Johnny?”

Johnny nervously answers, “uh, uh, three.”

“Oh my,” says Father, “it sounds like we have a heretic on our hands! O.K., Johnny how many persons in God?”

The boy responds, “One.”

“Listen, Johnny,” Father tries to explain, “There is one God and Three Persons in God. It's just like your family, it's your father, you and your mother. How many families?”

Johnny tearfully answers, “One.”

“O.K., then. Your father, he's like God the Father. You are like the Son. Your mom is like the Holy Spirit. How persons in your family?”

“Three,” he says.

“Well, Johnny, you come back next week and you tell me what we've talked about.”

The next week Johnny comes in to see Father. He's obviously very confident and is even

smiling. “Johnny, are you ready?”

“Yes, Father!” “How many Gods are there?”

Johnny quickly answers, “One!”

“Good, we don’t have a heretic anymore! And how many persons in the one God?”

Johnny shouts out, “Five!” Father is shocked and asks Johnny to explain.

“Well, Father, last week you told me my Father was like God the Father, I was like the Son and mom like the Holy Spirit. Well since then, my mother had twins!”

Actually the Trinity is a mystery, not so much to be understood as to delight in, to enjoy and to live.

The entire life of grace, the entire life of faith is Trinitarian. All our life has its existence in the Triune God. In the Trinity we have our being, in God we exist, in God we move and have our being.

Let’s take the sign of the cross. I remember the story of two priests who had been missionaries in China. They returned for a visit to the small village where they had served. They were walking down a street in the village and along came a Chinese man on a bicycle. The man had heard these Catholic missionaries were around and he cycles miles to come to see them. He did not speak English and the missionaries had forgotten their Chinese. The man got off his bicycle, walked in front of the priests, bowed and slowly made the sign of the cross. He bowed again, got back on his bicycle and pedaled off.

The Chinese man wanted to express who he was. He wanted to express his identity as a Christian and as a Catholic. Our parents wanted us to identify as Catholic as soon as we were able to understand anything, so the first prayer they taught us was to make the sign of the cross.

In the Spanish Southwest of the U.S. we make the sign of the cross this way: we make a

cross with the index finger with the thumb with the other three fingers raised. There is one hand, representing the One God; the three raised fingers represent the Three Persons. The index finger and the thumb stand for the divinity and humanity of Christ, that he is true God and true man. We make the sign of the cross and at the end we kiss the thumb that forms the cross, for the cross is the source of our salvation.

The sign of the cross has been the source of the great inspirations of the past: the great projects and the greatest achievements that Christians and Christian communities have imagined and brought to completion. I am thinking of the great missionary movements throughout the history of the Church and the building of cathedrals.

The building of the cathedrals in the middle ages is an excellent examples of what I am referring to. What an imagination someone had! These immense structures which still stand, are a tribute to the inspired imagination of people like you and me. As architectural marvels, they are incomparable for their beauty, engineering genius and for the spiritual emotion they evoke. It took generations to build them and most who worked on them never saw the completed project.

Then there is the creation of a vast educational system for all age levels. Add to these the elaboration of theological systems of thought beginning with St. Paul, proceeding to thinkers like St. Basil, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and in our age, Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, the minds of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council and that of John Paul II.

Where do these things begin? At moments such as this conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, December 31, 1999. When two or three hundred are gathered in his name, "I am in their midst." And great things happen. When people dream alone, chances are those dreams will remain dreams. But when people dream together, then there is a greater chance that those dreams will come

true

I really hope this will not be just another conference, but that this time together for you will be a landmark in your journey of faith. I pray that you will remember this weekend as an event that will help you imagine a “new cathedral” in the world and that you will have a part in its construction. In other words, decide you will live your life in such a way that your life will make a difference in the world.

I turn now to the function of the Three Persons in our lives. First, there is God the Father. We know the Father through the Son. Jesus spoke of God as his *Abba*, his dad, his papa. We know that a masculine approach to God is not the only way to consider God. Jesus himself in the parable of the lost coin, likens God to a woman.

The famous Peruvian priest, Father Gustavo Gutierrez, the founder of liberation theology claims that the notion that God is Father is the most revolutionary expression in the New Testament. He says that evangelization is “sharing the joy that God is our Father.” The implications of the two words, “Our Father” are enormous. First we are all God’s children. This means we are his family and are all brothers and sisters to each other. He loves all his children alike. None are better loved nor considered better or less than any other. No language, culture, nor color of skin is better. God doesn’t want any of his children to hurt their brothers and sisters in any way, be it violence, oppression or injustice. Further, he wants his children to help one another, the strong helping the weak is what God wants to see.

Implied here are the ideals of equality, respect for the dignity of all, justice, peace and solidarity. In the Our Father we pray that his will be done. His will is that we be one, that we be merciful and compassionate, that we be concerned for one another, that we be true brothers and sisters all and that we regard ourselves as one human family. Also implied is that all life be

respected, that we be his stewards of the earth. Indeed, we do say a mouthful when we say the Our Father. No wonder at Mass we preface the prayer by the words, “Taught by our Savior’s command, WE DARE TO SAY!”

Allow me to interject here something on the feminine aspect of God. Last summer we U.S. bishops heard a beautiful talk on the Trinity by Cardinal Daly of Ireland. He referred to the writings of Blessed Juliana of Norwich where she describes her notion of Jesus as “mother.”

“As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our mother; that showed he in all, and especially in these sweet words where He says: ‘I it am’, that is to say, ‘I it am - the Might and the Goodness of Fatherhood. I it am - the Wisdom and the Kindliness of motherhood. I it am - the Light and the Grace that is all-Blessed Love. I it am - the Trinity. I it am - the Unity. I it am - the High Sovereign Goodness of all manner of things. I it am - that maketh thee to long. I it am - the endless fulfilling of all true desire...’

Our High Father, Almighty God,...willed that the Second Person should become our Mother, our Brother and our Saviour. Whereforth it followeth that as truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother. Our Father willeth; our Mother worketh, our good Lord the Holy Ghost confirmeth....

Thus is Jesus our true Mother according to nature, because He, being God, created us; and he is our true Mother according to Grace, by His taking of our created nature. All the fair working and all the sweet, kindly offices of dear-worthy Motherhood are appropriated to the Second Person, for in Him we have this goodly will whole and safe without end both by Nature and Grace, through His own proper goodness....

Our kind Mother, our gracious Mother, because he willed wholly to become our Mother in all things, he laid the foundation of His work low and full in the Virgin’s womb.... We know that all our Mothers bear us unto pain and dying.... But our very Mother, Jesus, he alone beareth us unto joy and to endless living, blessed may He be!....It is His glory to do it. And it is His will that we know this. For He willeth that we love Him sweetly and trust in Him meekly and mightly. And this showed He in these gracious words: ‘I keep thee full surely’”

We turn now to the Holy Spirit and the person of Jesus Christ. In the Creed we say, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. He has spoken through the prophets.”

Spiritual writers present different images and functions of the Holy Spirit. Some evoke a

gentle presence: “a peaceful dove,” “the source of prayer,” “the one who abides in the heart,” “the source of love,” “the spring of living water within us that cries ‘abba Father.’” All these are fine, but the sacred scriptures also attribute to the Spirit an awesome and immense power.

The Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruah*, the breath from God that gives life to creation. This Spirit of God “renews the face of the earth.” The Spirit in the prophets is the power to denounce social wrongdoing. The Spirit brings hope to those who suffer and brings about justice to the poor. The effects of the Spirit are justice and peace when the people of God are faithful to the covenant.

The Spirit signifies God’s close involvement with his people and in the events of history. God cares; God is there; he is compassionate and has a passionate regard for his people.

Our contemporary demand for justice has to do with giving each person his or her due, giving them “what they deserve”, “what they have earned,” or “what each person has a right to have.” Justice for the prophets goes beyond this kind of legalistic approach, it includes love, mercy and compassion.

I remember the example of this in the person of Bud Welch who lost his only daughter in the Oklahoma bombing of the federal building. He went to the father of Timothy McVeigh and promised him he, Bud, would do all in his power to prevent Timothy from capital punishment.

Yahweh’s justice prominently includes care and mercy to the widow, the orphan and the stranger. In our day these are the women in our day who suffer violence and injustice. The orphans of our day are the street children, those abused and abandoned. It includes the children who may never see the light of day because of abortion. The stranger of our day is the refugee and immigrant.

The God of Israel is a God of justice and demands of his people that they have correct relationships with others. The measure of human justice is nothing less than the justice of God.

The Spirit in Ezekiel (37, 1ff) is the promise of newness. The spirit will re-animate dead bones and will purify hearts with its breath. In Joel the Spirit will make sure God's plan for his people will be fulfilled: the young will prophesy and the old will dream dreams. The old will not have nightmares and the young will lose their cynicism! This is the Spirit we need now, to make the dead bones of our Newman Centers, of our parishes and dioceses to come back to life!

Isaiah prophesied that the promised Messiah would be gifted with all the gifts he would need to begin his rule of justice. When Jesus begins his ministry, he gives his "inaugural address" quoting Isaiah and making the prophets words his own: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor, sight to the blind, liberty to captives and to proclaim a year of favor of the Lord" (Lk. 4). He is saying that by the power of the Spirit he will create a new people in whom justice and compassion for the poor will prevail.

Later in the gospel of John we Jesus breathing his own Spirit to his apostles. Empowered with this Spirit they will continue his work.

St. Augustine explained the Trinity in terms of love. For him the Father is the "Lover," the giver of his total self. The Son is the "Beloved," the one who accepts love and returns it perfectly. The Spirit is "Love," the bond of mutual self-gift that unites Lover and Beloved.

St. Augustine is right, love permeates God. God is love. We know God when we love in the right way. We access the Trinity when we love. The more we love and the better we love, the clearer we see the face of God. The sign of true love is that we love as God loves, when we make loving God and neighbor our priorities. The expression of love is justice. Love is the foundation of justice.

We can love like God because "the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that has been given us" (Rom. 5,5). Note that the Spirit is at work where the best things happen: IN THE HEART! The heart is the source of love, faith, hope, dreams, forgiveness and mercy.

Again, the measure of our love of God is the way we love our neighbor.

We can only know God the divine through the human experience. That's the only way we can know. So it's by analogy and parallels that we know God. In reflecting on the Trinity we gain insight on correct human activity and on correct interpersonal relationships. The true Christian community is characterized by mutuality, equality and reciprocity. The Trinity reminds us of our need for solidarity, our need for each other, the need others have for us and the need we have for others.

Thirty years ago when our U.S. astronauts went to the moon, they were the first to observe the planet earth from outer space. What a beautiful sight it was: a serene sapphire shining bright against the black background of space. They saw no boundaries from space. Earth seemed so peaceful and together. In a way that view of the earth reminds us of what an ideal world it could and should be, everyone united and at peace with one another.

The connection between the Trinity and our lives is this: it is in us as individuals, as community and as world where the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit act. We are the environment, the external place where the divine, where God wants to be present and where the power of the Spirit can be detected. When we allow to be moved by that Spirit and act as a consequence of that touch, the work we do is God's work on earth.

I believe the Spirit is at work in everyone of us and does so through our imagination. That is how inspiration happens, how dreams come about as well as those visions about which the prophet Joel spoke. The inspired imagination created by the Spirit is a liberating, freeing experience. It frees us from the status quo, from the routine, from what is expected, to what surprises, turns things around, shakes things up. And if guided by Gospel principle, can lead tgo a renewed and transformed world. This involves daring and courage because this way of imagining of ourselves, of our Church and of the world can lead to a heroic and extraordinary use of our individual and collective talent.

People like Archbishop Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, Thea Bowman and Joseph Bernardin allowed their imagination to be moved by the Spirit. They were moved to dream and envision, and then act to eradicate the evils of injustice, racism, violence and selfishness, and make way for respect, peace, harmony among all peoples and promote efforts towards the common good.

At the close of the second millennium, we look forward to “the Great Jubilee” which will be enlivened by the power of the Holy Spirit. Empowered by the Spirit, the Church can dare dream dreams, hope for great things, see visions and witness in word and deed. The fruits of the work of the Spirit in us will be seen in traces of justice in the world.

On December 31, 1999, we see a world with all kinds of challenges: racism, division, violence, ethnic cleansing, the negative forces of globalization and children crying who should not be crying. Ours is a world beset by every social evil, but I see a Church vibrant and alive, hopeful that it can bring hope, encouraged that it can in turn encourage, inspired that it can in turn inspire. I see a Church empowered by a spirit of bold creativity to face a future replete with the potential to become a beacon of hope and a source of service for generations to come and to be by its witness of oneness a model of solidarity for the world.

Let's go out there and build cathedrals!

