

"CHALLENGES FACING THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD TODAY"

INDIANA PROVINCE ASSEMBLY

The University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana
June 11, 1991

By The
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INTRODUCTION

I wish first of all to thank you for your invitation to address you as you begin your provincial assembly. It is always a treat coming to this great university -- it is a source of pride for so many of us U. S. Catholics who grew up cheering for Old Notre Dame.

Your invitation to speak today offers me the opportunity to leave Las Cruces - even if only briefly - and look at my own life and ministry as bishop, and our diocese from a different perspective or context. You too, have left your usual routine and have come together for prayer, fraternal time, for rest and for a chance to look at your life and ministry as members of the Congregation of the Holy Cross.

I envy you. For twenty-one years I was closely associated with a religious congregation of priests very similar to your own, the Congregation of the Priests of St. Basil. When I became a bishop, one of the sad things was to lose that close association with my brothers. The relationship would never be the same again; it was like dying, and some- thing I don't like to think about too much.

I'd like to address you on your present relationship to your own congregation as well as your relationship to other present-day realities. Your Congregation and these realities are changing, and therefore we have to ask ourselves, how do changed realities affect how we relate to them? How does a changed Church and a changed world challenge us to new ways of relating to them? How are we connecting to the real issues of our day?

Changes challenge. They challenge us to grow, individually and communally. Changes outside of us call forth the dynamism of life inside of us to greater wisdom, to greater loving, to greater strength -- and as members of a religious community, to greater unity and bondedness.

Fr. Rosendo Urrabazzo, president of the Mexican-American Cultural Center, related to me an experience he had with permanent deacons during a retreat he was conducting for them. He first asked them what the present concerns of the Church are. They answered: proselytism, authority, women in the Church, the shortage of priests and finances. He then asked them what their own concerns and that of their families were. They answered: high interest rates on loans and credit cards, health and medical insurance, the high cost and quality of the education of their children, mortgages, insecurity of their jobs, drugs and the high rate of crime, especially break-ins into their homes.

Father Rosendo pointed out to them how disparate both sets of concerns were. The Church, at all levels and through its invitation, is so often regrettably concerned about its own internal, parochial life. Father Rosendo told them that people will continue to give up on the Church until the real concerns of the families become the primary concerns of the Church. In other words, we must relate, we must connect.

Perhaps the Church cannot do anything to bring high interest and insurance rates down, but the Church has to provide people with understanding, hope and encouragement, and the place and time to share the pain. The Church needs to be with those for whom life becomes more and more unbearable. In Spanish we use the word ACOMPANAMIENTO to refer to the kind of presence we are called to provide. Fr. Alfonso Nebreda, SJ, one of the greatest teachers I ever had, used to speak about the word PASTORAL, which he explained as "the Church speaking, through word and action, in a way that people understand...the mercy and love of God".

We priests are still the bridges for most people in the Church, and our responsibility is to speak to them in ways and about things that matter to them. I would like to speak to you around several things that matter today and things that challenge us to new ways of relating to them. We are called to relate with greater understanding and concern to those realities of life, society and the Church, which themselves have altered, some in a radical and irreversible way.

A. The Challenge for a New Relationship to the World

1. The World at Large: The International Scene

In spite of the recent Persian Gulf War, there are signs of hope in the world today -- signs that bespeak the action and presence of the Spirit of God: the Berlin Wall has been blown away; the two Germanies have united - albeit in a fledgling kind of way; Poland enjoys a new freedom, as does Yugoslavia; the Baltic and Balkan States stir with realistic hopes for a freer future; the Soviet Socialist Republics are no longer the monolithic fabrication it once was. People who live in these places are profoundly hopeful for a better future.

Latin America, in spite of unbelievable poverty, enjoys more democracies than ever before. While some of us are skeptical of the proposed Free Trade Agreement involving Mexico, at least our country is taking our neighbors to the south into consideration, and there may be a chance for bi-lateral approaches to solving problems that affect us together.

The world does breathe easier as the powerful nations talk seriously and practically about arms limitations and cut-backs in military expenditures. No doubt the Spirit of God is in some anonymous, mysterious way present in historical events that bespeak greater and truer freedom, and of the elevation of peoples to a more human existence. We need to acknowledge the hopeful and the life-giving signs in the world. But all is not well.

The victory parades celebrating the Persian Gulf war point to a super patriotism that places our country's goals before principle. Ours is a controlling, superior posture, we seem to have a divine right to tell other countries what to do. What is best for us must somehow be best for the world. We seem to love to pick on little people; if they don't cooperate, they run the risk of being victims of genocide. We find it necessary to lament the deaths of the 300 U.S. men and women who died in the war, but little is said about the horrible number of 100,000 plus Iraqis whose lives were antiseptically snuffed out under the sands of the desert. And then, after the war, we seem to have run from the aftermath. Once things are secure for our purposes and interests, we

make little efforts to help resolve the conflicts and crises that ensued after the bombs stopped falling. The Pope was right: wars do not settle problems. They usually make things worse.

The war was symptomatic of the violence syndrome of our society. The violent way supersedes diplomacy and the patience that it often requires.

In the light of this we as Church are called to further the cause of peace and non-violence. The voices of the pacifists were silenced by the loud noises of the desert storm, and it now becomes clear that we must start anew; the alliances for peace have to re-group, again, and it may be harder this time, because hi-technology in war won a lot of points.

The Church can help. We have a universalist view and we are heirs to a strong tradition of concern for the little people of the world. To the cause of peace, justice and fairness we offer the mighty witness of Isaiah, Jesus, Mary, John the Baptist, saints, prophets and martyrs who throughout the history of Christianity have been present to create peacemakers who are referred to in the beatitudes as the true children of God, the ones worthy of being daughters and sons of the God of Shalom.

2. The Challenges of U.S. Culture

In February of this year, an article appeared in Life magazine written by Mr. Lee Attwater assisted by another writer. You will recall that Mr. Attwater gained notoriety within the Republican party for his negative campaign tactics. His three bibles, books that he carried with him everywhere, were Machiavelli's The Prince, Plato's Republic and Sun Tzu's The Art of War. These books are all on either politics or on the acquisition and use of power where the ends justify the means. After Bush was elected, during a speech where Attwater was ridiculing Dukakis as a "rocky squirrel riding a war tank", he felt intense pain in his leg, fell to the ground, and shouted "Help me, help me!" He was rushed to the hospital where the diagnosis showed that he had a tumor the size of an egg in his brain. He goes on in his article to tell the story of his deteriorating

health and what went on in his mind and in his heart as he faced impending death, an ordeal that he considered to be the most formidable challenge of his life in what was to be his "last campaign".

He called his friends and picked the minds of religious people, ministers of all faiths. He reached the conclusion that the common denominator of all religions and denominations was the golden rule, "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself." He also decided that he must come to terms with his Maker. Prior to this he had no religious leanings, he neither prayed nor read the Bible. Now he found himself being kind to people and found it in his heart to reconcile with such people as Ron Brown, Chairman of the Democratic Party and even with Michael Dukakis. He decided that he needed to let go of the control that he once thought he had and remembered the words of Charles Coleson: "You thought that you were in control, but you never were."

Prior to his conversion, he had always sensed that something was wrong, deeply wrong, with this county. It became dramatically clear to him during his illness that what America had gone after in a relentless kind of way, was acquisition, the acquisition of power, wealth and prestige. He admitted that he had acquired more than his share of these things, and further concluded that even if one has these things in great abundance there is always something missing. What was missing in America is what was missing in his own heart and soul, and that was the spiritual dimension. If the leaders of the 80's had emphasized power, wealth and prestige, the leaders of the 90's needed to lead us along the lines of spiritual values. He states in his article that what America needs is "a bit of heart and a lot of brotherhood." In fighting his illness, he discovered that this spiritual lack is the tumor in the soul of America. Lee Attwater died just a few weeks after the article appeared at the age of 40.

The lesson of Lee Attwater is as clear as it is powerful. The temptations of greed and selfishness in terms of wealth, power and prestige resound so closely to the temptations of Jesus in the desert, and they are the temptations that we all experience at one time or another, and, like Jesus, we are tempted throughout our lives.

B. The Challenge for a New Relationship to the Foreign Missions

You deserve to be proud and have a large degree of satisfaction for your missionary work. I am somewhat familiar with your great work in Chile; I had the occasion to visit your men in Chile a few years ago. Your work in the missions is a challenge to us, the sending Church of the United States. Any sending Church needs to question its right to send. We must never take that right for granted. A sending Church has to re-examine and reassess itself constantly as it exercises that right.

We ourselves as sending Church need to heed the very prophetic voices that we send. We are challenged by the call to be counter-cultural witnesses in a society beset with the spiritual gap and moral deterioration described in the Lee Attwater story. The relentless ambition to ACQUIRE, accompanied by selfishness and greed, has unfortunately become an attribute of Western society: get all you can, as fast as you can, no matter how. The end of having justifies any means for getting, irregardless of who might get hurt.

Yes, brothers, we have a lot of cleaning up to do; our work is cut out for us here at home. Here at home we not only need to keep the fires going, we need to carry on the battle against all worldly spirits...and keep preaching against the idols that we worship here at home.

You missionaries are a tremendous consolation to us at home, because while our culture exports an empty value system to the rest of the world, our Church exports the Gospel of salvation by means of you. And then through you, we import that same message that is sent by the very people you were sent to evangelize!

Evangelization is a two-way street. We can never be so bold and say that we are bringing Christ to a people who do not have Him. Christ is there already. Evangelization is the happy meeting between the Christ that we bring and the Christ that is there in the folks we serve.

Missionaries are sent to teach, but they are sent to learn too, so that you may return to tell us that what Jesus said is true: the Kingdom of God does belong to the poor, that peacemakers

shall be called the Children of God, that the merciful will find mercy and that the Kingdom of God most certainly belongs to those who work, suffer and die for righteousness and justice.

C. The Challenge for a New Relationship to the Education Mission

Catholic education is one of the great achievements of the Church in the United States and even though maintaining the vast system of parochial schools, private high schools and universities takes so much sacrifice and costs so much, we, who run them, and those we serve, are willing to pay the price.

We believe we have something to say, we are convinced that our Catholic tradition has a wisdom accumulated over the centuries to pass on from generation to generation. We are truly earthen vessels that carry a message of precious gold.

This university is seen by many of us as a privileged place for the promotion of the Kingdom view. We expect you to be visionaries, to help give direction to our Church and society for the future. This is a place where we expect real values to be transmitted and nurtured. We want you to produce successful people who not only become professionals and leaders, but integral humanists and women and men of faith. It is said that Catholics have come of age in this country, they have made it to the upper middle class and that the largest denomination in the U.S. Congress is Roman Catholic. But many of us question just what type of Catholics are "making it" and whether our Catholic education really does make a difference, whether we simply become satisfied with helping people become materially successful. In a word Catholic universities are called to be prophetic, and dare their students to dream and live the dream of Jesus for the world: one devoid of worldly ambition and competitiveness, individualism, male superiority and racism.

Some of your students came with a faith and morality, deeply ingrained through the careful Catholic parenting they received at home. Recognize these special people and reaffirm by what you say and do here at the University what they learned from their parents.

Others will come strong physically and materially, but with undernourished spirits. These are the diamonds in the rough that still have a chance - perhaps the last one - to become a learner for the Kingdom. In all your students recognized that God has planted the seeds of goodness, love and true wisdom, your task as educators is to evoke (e-ducere) the seminal dynamic that is already there.

D. The Challenge for a New Relationship with Your Congregation

As members of a religious congregation you are members of one another, bonded for mutual support, for getting the job done and getting it done well. You have formed a union in order to pool resources, to learn from one another, but most important, to witness to the one body of Christ that professes the one faith, a common vision, a union solid in the grand purposes of the Kingdom of God. I urge you to keep nurturing your love for your community, see it as your greatest source of strength and as the best place to invest your talents, energies and wisdom. Your esprit de corps, your family spirit, is already a blessing of joy for the Church. Take care of your Congregation not for your sakes alone, but also for the rest of us who share your faith, your cause and the reason for your hope, Christ the Lord.

In community dreams have a greater chance to come true. If done alone, dreams remain dreams, but when shared, dreams can become a reality. And for those who follow Jesus, our dreams are those which he envisioned and for which he gave his life.

Focus not on the negative, neither in your past nor in the present. A friend of mine says it this way: "What you focus on, you give power to." Acknowledge the negatives, the divisions, the conflicts, the yet unresolved misunderstandings, but don't let them control your relationships among the brotherhood. Acknowledge the problems of finances for your institutions, the secularist influence in your educational programs, the fact that your security depends so much on the wealthy and the powerful, that there is a shortage of vocations, and so on -- but don't let these overwhelm the positive. Concentrate as a community on the goodness and wisdom of your men,

your potential, your charisms and traditions established by your founders. Recognize that what you are doing is important and what lies in the future belongs to God to determine. Be not dominated by the fear of death but by the spirit of hope.

Above all try to avoid the pitfalls of a narrow vision that can result from a possessive and overly-protective relationship to your institutions or projects. There has been too much "institutional narcissism" in the Church in the past.

E. The Challenge for a New Relationship to the Priesthood Today

In the book In Mysterious Ways: The Death and Life of a Parish Priest by Paul Wilker, the subject of the story, Fr. Joseph Greer, gives this advice to young priest interns: 'You have to be nuts to go into the priesthood. It's an awful job. The pay is terrible, the hours are worse. People don't look up to you, they look down. You have to love God, and if you don't, it will grind you up. Remember no trumpets will sound, and you are going to spend more time being a carpenter than being a priest.' (pp 5-6)

All in all, I think it's an exciting time to be a priest. We seem to be at the cutting edge of a new and fresh priestly style in order to meet the needs of the folks today. I sense in what I read and hear around the country a new appreciation and understanding of the priesthood being captured especially by priests themselves. We appear to be coming to terms with a new identity for priesthood, with its focus on preaching and leading people in the liturgical spirituality of Vatican II, building community, and helping the people of God serve the peoples in the world.

The catch words that could help us in identifying our changing role are: servant leaders, catalysts, story tellers and men of God.

Priests are servant leaders that enable and empower the whole community; they help the rest of the Church be the Sacrament of Christ and fulfill its mission in the world.

Rather than monopolizing leadership in worship, preaching, building the community and service, the priest of today is called to be a catalyst for the surfacing of the many ministries that

serve in those areas. The priest is not so much a controller of ministry, but an enabler, and in a sense a "vocation-director". He is a nurturer of the charisms and gifts in the rest of God's people.

The salvation of the ministry of priesthood is collaboration and partnership with the non-ordained, the lay men and women. The ecclesial approach to ministry is much more effective these days, not only for the results we want, but also for the powerful witness of the Church's unity. But in all this collaboration the priest must continually remind everyone else of the Jesus story and interject the Jesus agenda and his priorities in all decision-making and planning. The priest is to keep the memory of Jesus alive.

Finally the priest is a man of God, the person who mediates between people and God. This is the most traditional expectation that the folks have of us...and it is a valid one. This is probably the most basic of all our roles, but to be men of God to people we must be men of God - for God. I see noble efforts being done by many priests: more are seeking out spiritual directors and regular confessors; more is expected of retreats and those who conduct them; the best priests I know are those who belong to "Jesus Caritas" priest support groups; I see more priests attending 12-step programs and those who go to houses of affirmation and guest houses are no longer weighed down by a stigma -- rather, they are admired for their courage and determination to change.

We are challenged by the Lord to belong more and more to Him, to allow Him to enter more and more to the very core of our being...and let Him be the shepherd of our souls, the force and truth behind our preaching, our administering, our activism, our involvement in the troubles of our day. The challenge is to let go, relax and be trusting, let us not be overly anxious as we traverse the sea turbulent with conflict and uncertainty...and listen to the voice that says "Do not fear, it is I".