

EVANGELIZATION OF THE EVANGELIZERS OF HOPE

I. INTRODUCTION

My dear friends, I am indeed happy and privileged to be among you today. I consider Houston as home because it was near here in Bay City that I was born and where my faith was nurtured. It was in this area that the Lord started working on me. He is not finished yet. It is a special joy for me to be coming from your neighboring state of New Mexico (which, incidentally, is part of the United States) and share the deep faith of our people whose faith dates back to just about as far back as you can go in the history of the Church in this country. I consider myself a missionary, not only because I work as a missionary for several years, but because I have left my home area and gone another part of the Southwest to share my God-given faith. But, as happens in every missionary adventure, I have received much more than what I have given. You see, evangelization is a two way street: one takes the Christ of one's background; we carry our Christ but only to find that Christ was already there, and therefore, the adventure of mission is a happy and powerful encounter between the Christ that we take and the Christ that we find..., and together we expand our Christ experience.

How deep is our hope? This is a question that must be addressed by those who carry the Gospel message, by the evangelizers, and it must be a question that is made again and

again. It is part of the conversion or metanoia experience to which we are called. Metanoia is a series of getting up after failing; healing after we have broken, getting back on track again and again after we have veered and being reborn in Christ's spirit, and this happens throughout life.

The other day I was traveling between San Antonio and El Paso, where our closest airport is, and I was sitting next to someone who I think had to be a Baptist preacher to ask me "Sir, are you going to heaven?" and I answered "Well, I sure hope so!" He then said, "Well, I don't hope so, I know so. I am going to heaven!" I simply answered, "Congratulations!" That conversation made clear to me what metanoia means for us Catholics, and that is, an on-going conversion that lasts throughout life. For us conversion is not a one time event but something that recurs throughout our lives. No sooner do we feel that we have arrived, when we soon fall on our faces and are humbled into the on-going process of conversion.

I am sure that for you who are involved in ministry and evangelization, the challenge of metanoia is very real. Today, I would like to challenge you and myself, on one of the essential components of metanoia... on the virtue of hope. "Venerate the Lord, that is, Christ, in your hearts. Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply... " (1 Peter 3,15). We know who the reason for our hope is and that is Jesus Christ our Savior. The "reason" here is not so much a logical

explanation but a person, who came out of the loving initiative of the Father who "so loved the world, that He gave His only Son" (John 3,16).

Vatican II gives us another strong reason for being people of hope. The title of one of the great masterpieces of Vatican II is "Gaudium et Spes" which means joy and hope. This is what the Church is called to be, the joy and the hope for all the world. By the way we relate to one another, by the way we relate to the world, by the way we relate to those who do not belong to the Church, by the way we relate to the injustices, wars and addictions to world, we provide, the world with joy and hope. The Council says it this way:

"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (Gaudium et Spes, no. 1).

Remember the early Christians and how much they anxiously awaited the coming the Lord. Of course, for him the Lord was just around the corner, and they hoped that He would come tomorrow or at least the day after tomorrow, and when He came, He would vindicate all their sufferings, trials and persecutions. Remember how powerfully the book of Revelation of St. John ends "Maranatha, come Lord Jesus! Maranatha, the Lord comes!" They were excited and enthusiastic about the coming of the Lord, and above all they were hopeful people.

I remember once, during Advent, that I was trying to get the people to respond loudly after the prayer following the Our Father, and I wanted the people to boom out the words "For yours is the Kingdom, the power and the glory now and forever." I kept raising my voice after the Our Father "...AS WE WAIT IN JOYFUL HOPE FOR THE COMING OF OUR SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST." And as I was raising my voice there was a child in his father's arms sitting on the front row with his eyes wide open and he got all excited and shouted with his fist raised, "Go for it, Father!" Well, that child entered into the excited hope of the second coming of Jesus. I would suppose that this is the mission of all of us who profess to be ministers of hope, and that it to excite not only the children, but the world with the hope of Jesus' coming.

Pope Paul the VI in his magnificent, Evangelii Nuntiandi challenges us to witness our faith and our hope: "Do you really believe what you are proclaiming? Do you live what you believe? Do you really preach what you live? The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness in preaching" (EN No. 76).

This challenge to witness to hope, is not a quality that is to be considered extra or something that simply goes along with the preaching and teaching that we do. It is an essential and constitutive element of evangelization and all ministry. Yet, it is easy to falter in the virtue of hope. There are just so many things that are there to discourage us in this age of turmoil and

confusion. Let me remind you, "where sin abounds, grace super-abounds." This means that if there are a thousand reasons to lose hope, there are ten thousand reasons to maintain that hope.

I remember the heady days of Vatican II and the period shortly thereafter. This was twenty-five years ago and I recall with what excitement we would look for any newspaper that would carry the full text of any approved document from the Council Fathers. We would eagerly follow the discussions of the Council and its spirit created in us a hope full of enthusiasm and excitement. Since then, we have been sobered by the difficulties in Church reform; some things are not clear enough; things sometimes seem inconsistent between what was promised twenty-five years ago and what has actually happened since and what has happened to the universal call to sanctity and holiness? How seriously has that been taken?

I like what my good friend Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee says about hope for this post-Conciliar age. He talks about a possible naivete and innocent optimism that we may have had twenty-five years ago, but that now because of real experiences in facing up to the harsh reality of reform, we have attained a level of what he calls "mature hope." Mature hope, as I understand it, recognizes the real hard work that goes along with reform and also that hope is very different from optimism. Hope is the Christian virtue that says that things will not always be rosy nor easily-attained, but we must never lose sight of the promise that Jesus gave us, and that we should never be afraid. In other words,

things will not necessarily be better, but the Lord will be there... and that is the source of our hope, not that things will go our way, but that even if they don't, we will not be forsaken. St. Paul was one of those people who had this mature hope when he said, "For your sake we are being slain all the day long; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered. Yet in all this we are more than conquerors because of him who has loved us. For I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor death nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord" (Rm. 8,36-39).

II. THE CHALLENGE TO HOPE

How do we see ourselves as ministers of hope? How do we measure up? Are we simply surviving or are we anxious to grow and therefore be in a better position to give life? To survive simply means to live through whatever trials comes our way; it means simply tolerating a bad situation. But we are called to go beyond tolerance and embrace the challenge to live bodily and love courageously. We are called to go beyond anger and impatience to the hopeful patience that must have been strongly present in the remnant of Israel and in the heart of Mary and in the other Anawin who were essentially people of hope. We must never lose the hopeful patience that must have been in the world between the death of Jesus on the Cross and His glorious Resurrection. We cannot

allow ourselves to be overcome by negativity and setbacks, but to look forward to the victory promised by Christ and be relentless in our various ministries as hopeful people. We cannot simply surrender to those forces and temptations to quit. Father Alfonso Nebreda used to tell us that the most common temptation for Christians is to quit. And therefore, we cannot simply fade away and go back to becoming spectators of the drama of the Church's mission, but recommit ourselves with even more vigor and participate in the most exciting of all projects, the building of Christ's Kingdom. We must not even give up on others but strive ever more diligently to be partners in our respective collaborative ministries. Our fear must turn to courage and rejection must turn to acceptance, rejection of what is not life-giving and acceptance of all that does give life even though it means heartaches and brokenness.

In Las Cruces, there lives a man regarded as mentally-handicapped. He walks from his home each day to downtown Las Cruces, a distance of about fifteen miles back and forth. A friend of mine asked him the other day what caused people to commit suicide. He said it was because of the "suicide voices." When he was asked what these were, he answered, "They are the voices of the bad memories of the past. It's like an audio tape and people can become almost possessed by these voices and forget all the memories of the good things...they then take their lives." I do not think he is all that mentally-handicapped. We too can allow the voices of the bad memories kill the hope in our hopes. We need to listen

instead to the voices of the good things that have happened in our lives and of the people that we love and how significant they have been. Above all, we must listen to the Voice of the Holy Spirit; I am frequently consoled by the promise of Jesus, that He would send the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, who would remind us of all the things he had told us. Now that is a voice to listen to! For no night is so dark that it does not have a dawn. Now storm is so severe that it does not ebb. No mountain so high that it cannot be climbed. No river so deep that it cannot be crossed.

III. SIGNS OF HOPE IN SOCIETY AND THE CHURCH

Even in the midst of this terrible war in the Persian Gulf we must not lose hope. But is there anything we can base our hope for peace? I believe there are bases for dialogue that is so essential in establishing a long and lasting peace. There are certain common denominators among Jews, Muslims and Christians. First of all, we are all praying to the same God: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the same God of Jesus and Mohamet. We all share a common origin, and that is our common father in faith, Abraham. All three religious groups believe in a God who promises a bright and shining future. It is nothing else than the virtue of hope can bring us together.

Last November I had the privilege to visit El Salvador with three other U.S. bishops. We were invited by the Archbishop of San Salvador and by the Jesuits. We were present at the memorial Mass

celebrated for the assassinated Jesuits. Father Jon Sobrino, S.J., said "When there is suffering with love, there is hope. When there is great suffering with great love, there is great hope." I never saw such hope as in the people of El Salvador who have suffered and endured so much violence and death.

There are many things in the Church in this country that give me hope. I am encouraged by such as the healing going on now, not only that which is promoted by the Charismatic movement, but also by counseling and the Twelve Step Program of the Alcoholics Anonymous. The Twelve Step Program is becoming a process that brings healing to so many who suffer from brokenness and addiction. Father Richard Roahr, OFM, has said that perhaps the Twelve Step program is the greatest contribution to world spirituality from the United States. I understand the Twelve Step program is based and inspired on the Gospel.

I see hope all around me. I see it in the faces of the catechumens who look forward with such longing to be initiated into the Church. I see hope in the new immigrants, those anxious to create a new life in this land of freedom and opportunity. I see hope in those who have found the joy and satisfaction of ministry through renewal weekends, Cursillo, or Renew. I see hope in the engaged and newly-wed who look forward to a life together. I see hope in the couples who decide to have babies. It's encouraging to me to see young women who--in spite of the trials of single-parenthood--opt to give life rather than have an abortion. I have

been inspired by those dying of AIDS and who, with strong faith, accept the death that leads them to New Life.

I see hope in the people who take over the responsibility of administering a parish when a priest is not available.

My hope is enhanced by the growing awareness that the spirituality of Vatican II is the liturgy. The liturgy is providing an appreciation of Church, of what we are and called to be. It is in liturgy that people are restored with life and energy in the mission of the Church and where we are brought from helplessness to hopefulness.

Children are a constant source of hope for me. The other day the former Governor of New Mexico, Jerry Apodaca, came to our city. In his address, he referred to a conversation he had with his grandson, John. He was driving them to school and little John said, "Grandpa, isn't it true that we have to love ourselves, if not then how are we going to love others. And if we don't love others, how are they going to love us?" Jerry asked Johnny, "Now, where did you learn that? Who told you this?" Johnny pointed to his younger brother and said, "Jason..." From the mouths of babes comes wisdom.

IV. THE MINISTRY OF HOPE

We have talked and listened to a lot about hope in this conference. What specifically are to hope for? Let me tell you, we Christians are supposed to hope big and to dream big. We are bold in our faith, bold in our love, and bold in our hope.

Let us dare dream about a world 1,000 years from now! Let us not be satisfied with simply planning for next year nor even for the next ten years. What we need to do is to dream about a great future. Allow me to share my dream, my hope. I dream of a clean world in every sense of the word: clean skies, clean air, clean and abundant water, clean people, a clean Church! I want to see the whole world shining clean as it spins and whirls around the sun and dances with the planets. I hope for a world dazzling with love and where racism, bigotry, sexism, and prejudice and discrimination are gone.

I hope for a world resplendent with green forests and clear running rivers where children can swim and fish...and in the waters of the ocean, I want to see many thousands of whales swimming and singing. Above all, I want a world that lives in the loving embrace of the peace of Jesus that is his promise and his gift.

But how can we dream such dreams and have such visions? Good question. The answer is the one given in the story of the world's

salvation in the Holy Book of Scripture. Let me tell you what I read in that Book because that is where our hope comes from.

I read in the Holy Book about a man named Abraham who risked all he had, for he was promised a progeny more numerous than the stars in the sky and more numerous than the sands of the sea.

I read in the Holy Book about a man named Isaiah and his description of a world to come where the wolf will be the guest of the lamb, the leopard will lie with the kid and the calf and the young lion will browse together and that they will be led by a child.

I read in the Holy Book about a woman named Hannah who never lost hope and when the Lord gave her a child, she said, "The bows of the mighty are broken while the tottering gird on strength. The mighty he casts down and he lifts up the lowly." (1 Sam.

I read in the Holy Book about a man named Luke who wrote about the poor who are given hope when they hear the Good News. I read in the Holy book about a man named Paul who wrote that "love forgives all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

I read in the Holy Book about a man named Peter who told us to be ready to give the reason for our hope.

I read in the Holy Book about a man named John who lifts our hopes when he writes about the vision he had of the new Jerusalem, and the new heaven and the new earth.

I read in the Holy Book about a woman named Mary magnified the Lord for his mighty deeds throughout the ages and the great things yet to happen.

I read in the Holy Book about a man named Jesus who preached like no one had done before, who loved like no one had loved before, who was killed for our sake, rose and went to heaven, but promised to return.

...and I saw in Houston a people imbued with love and with deep yearning for peace and who cried out "Maranatha, come Lord Jesus!"

V. CONCLUSION

As I speak of the vision of God's Kingdom, I am reminded of a man--known surely by some of you--named Willie Velazquez. Willie almost single-handed refashioned the entire political structure in the southwest so as to benefit everyone, especially the minorities. Life, as a consequence, in the southwest is now more democratic and more people have a chance to participate in decisions that affect their lives and those of their children. Willie's influence is felt to this day. He died a young man, at the age of 42 not too

ago. I happened to be in his hometown of San Antonio when the funeral took place. The story was told of his untimely death. Early in the evening he told his wife, "I feel very tired, I don't think I'm going to make it." Later that night he awoke for the last time and told his wife and friends, "Que bonito es el nuevo mundo" ("How beautiful the new world is.") He repeated the same words, "Que bonito es el nuevo mundo," and died.

What might he have meant by those words? Some say he was referring to the new world in heaven where he was going. Others say he was referring to the new world he had recreated in the southwest. Still others, myself included, believe he saw a glimpse of the world as Jesus wants it--a world re-created according to the laws of God's Kingdom: beautiful and dazzling with the beauty of God.

Let us accept the task of promoting the Kingdom of Hope, of Love, of Peace, of Justice, knowing that we are not alone, no matter how dark life might be; it is God's spirit in us and around us that never forsakes us. Remember the song of our youth:

"When you walk through the world
keep your head up high,
And don't be afraid of the dark.
At the end of the storm is a golden sky,
And the sweet silver song of a lark.
Walk on, walk with hope in your heart.
...and you'll never walk alone."

Thank you.