

Profess and Cherish Our Catholic Identity

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Dinner Address
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The theme you have asked me to address this evening is “Profess and Cherish Our Catholic Identity.” Interestingly, the subject you chose is more an exhortation than a topic. I must confess: in exhorting you to strengthen your love for your Catholic identity, I feel, in many ways, that I am preaching to the choir. It is difficult for me to imagine a group in this Archdiocese that has more energetically sought or more successfully achieved a lived faithfulness to Christ and to his Church. Witness what you are doing here this evening as a Guild. Your example is and has been extraordinary, and it is a great blessing to the Church in Boston.

But the choir, too, needs encouragement if it is to remain faithful. Without encouragement, the choir can forget why it sings. Or it might, in complacency, be satisfied with singing badly. Or, God forbid, the choir might not show up at all. And so I am honored and grateful for this opportunity to exhort you to remain steadfast in the faith that God has given you, and to live it in such a way that your faith continues to nourish you, to

challenge you, and – through you – to challenge others to strengthen their faith. By doing this you contribute to the salvation God wants for you and you contribute to the building up of the Body of Christ.

In my remarks this evening, I would like to do three things. First, I think it important that we name again our identity as Catholics. Second, I want to identify two powerful challenges to our Catholic identity. And third, I will offer three suggestions to you that I hope will strengthen you in the encouragement that you desire and that you need in your faith.

I. What is our identity as Catholics? Mistakenly, a lot of people identify our Catholicism first with a collection of historical facts or a set of doctrines. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our identity as Catholics is not rooted in an object or an idea, but in a person. Our identity as Catholics is in Jesus Christ. By our baptisms we were inserted into Christ and we became one with him. We are one with Christ in everything – in his preaching and his teaching and his works; and in his suffering and his dying and his resurrection. St. Paul was so taken by his insertion into and identification with Christ that he says to the Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). What Paul experiences in his own life, he desires for his disciples with all his heart. To the Philippians he says: “Have among you the same mind which

was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). In other words, “Let Christ be the life in you.”

As Catholics, we do not merely live with Christ. We live in him. By the outpouring of his love for us, everything Christ Jesus has and is has become ours. Christ has given us a full share in his inheritance; he has given us his “Sonship” if you will. In him we have been completely reconciled with the Father. The sin which caused our enmity with God has been washed away, and in Christ we are again true daughters and sons of the Father.

To safeguard that inheritance, Christ has given us the very life of God, the Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that our sins have been forgiven and that we have the courage we need to live in Christ and to speak and act as Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who keeps the community of disciples – the Church – faithful to Christ in word and in deed; it is the Holy Spirit who is the guarantor of our faith and our life in Christ.

Most importantly, Christ has given us himself: “Take, this is my body. . . This is my blood” (Mark 14: 22,23). You and I are called to the Eucharist, as were the first disciples, by Christ himself. At the Eucharist the Lord Jesus receives us and invites us to join him in his saving passion, death and resurrection. When, by God’s grace, we give ourselves fully at Mass to

participating in the Lord's saving sacrifice, we experience most perfectly our union and our identity in Christ Jesus. This is exactly why the Church speaks of the Eucharist as the "source and summit" of our life in Christ (*Lumen Gentium* 11). It is at the Eucharist that we live most fully in Christ. It is there that we experience ourselves "through him, with him and in him."

II. Throughout history the faithful disciple of Christ has always faced challenges for choosing Christ above all things. The Lord himself told his own Apostles as he sent them out, "I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves" (Mt 10:16). But, as St. Matthew tells us, Jesus also said in the same breath, "Therefore be prudent (*phrónimoi*), like serpents, and innocent as doves" (ibid.). So let us be prudent. What are the challenges we face as modern day disciples of the Lord Jesus? There are many; but tonight I want to draw our attention to two.

The first challenge involves the loss in modern times of the search for truth. In order to understand how significant this challenge is, we need to remind ourselves how things exist around us and how we know them. Permit me to introduce a moment of philosophy into my remarks to make the point.

Did you ever notice that the *identity* of a thing is distinct from the many different ways or *appearances* by which it can show itself or be seen

in the world. An individual object in the world can present itself in many different appearances, but among these appearances, there is a certain identity or truth to the object which the human person can grasp. A tree, for example, appears differently in different seasons of the year, but there is a definite identity or sameness which continues to manifest itself in these different appearances. The tree, in short, would never be mistaken for a windmill, because the windmill has its own identity and its own set of appearances.

When the human mind recognizes the identity of an object, we say, correctly, that we have *knowledge* of that object. Knowledge, in other words, is directed to that which repeatedly shows up as the “same” about an object. We call this metaphysical dimension of the object the nature or the *truth* of the object.

If, on the other hand, we are focused on a particular material appearance of an object (and not its truth), we have only *opinion* concerning that object. Opinion, in other words, is directed to a particular physical *appearance* or group of *appearances* of an object. There can be many opinions about any object in the world, whether it be a material object, like a tree or a windmill, or an immaterial object, like justice or even religion. Each object, however, has only one truth which is always greater than or

“beyond” the sum of its appearances, because the nature of the truth of a thing is not something physical like its appearances but metaphysical. It is the natural end and the work of reason to search ultimately for and to attain this metaphysical reality of truth.

We have lost this sense of truth, this search for the metaphysical nature of things. And the loss was not accidental. In the sixteenth century we see the rise of a determined effort to replace the search for truth with a new kind of knowing that is more practical and utilitarian. Niccolò Machiavelli, for example, writes in his work “The Prince” (1517) that he wants to know “the rules of conduct for a prince towards his subject and friends” (*The Prince* 15). But he makes it clear that he is not interested so much in the nature or the truth of the prince as he is in knowing what the prince needs to do to keep his power as prince. This, he says, is “the real truth of the matter.” With Machiavelli, the search for truth or the metaphysical nature of things is overthrown out of a desire for practicality and for what is “useful.” Not surprisingly, Machiavelli concludes that because a prince is surrounded by so much that is evil, – and I quote – “it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity” (ibid.).

Once truth is dislodged from the nature of things, things no longer are understood to have natures. Once the metaphysical dimension of reality is denied, we are left with a radical materialism; we are left only with a physical world of appearances from which we can derive nothing more than opinions. What, then, is the human person? It is whatever we say it is. What is authentic human living? It is whatever we say it is. What is marriage? It is whatever we say it is. Does this sound familiar? This is, in fact, the intellectual culture in which we find ourselves today, and it presents a huge challenge to us who understand ourselves as disciples of the truth.

The second challenge we face today likewise evolved in recent centuries. With the extraordinary and successful development of the empirical sciences during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a new interest arose in discovering how it is that an activity of the mind like science is possible at all. Whereas the human ability to know was taken for granted in the ancient and medieval world, the question of the possibility of knowledge becomes central in early modern thinking. Not surprisingly, with this new emphasis on the capacity for human thinking, the human person takes center stage.

Though there is a real legitimacy to raising the question of the possibility of human knowing, the way in which this inquiry developed had

some dire consequences for the pursuit of truth. The work of Rene Descartes (d. 1650) is a classic example of what went wrong. Descartes, in a letter to the dean and doctors of the Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne University in Paris, introduces his newly written *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) as a work which proves philosophically, for the first time, the existence of God. Interestingly, however, as one analyses the text of the *Meditations*, one discovers that the true intent of Descartes' work is to establish a particular theory with respect to the possibility of human knowledge. The question of God's existence is indeed raised in the work, but this discussion of God exists only to guarantee the possibility of the human person's experience of the sensible. The question of God, in other words, is introduced to only to advance a particular understanding of the human person. Whereas, until this time, the question of God had its place as the ultimate question of natural reason, that place has now been given over to the question of the human person. The question of the human person, therefore, begins to take its place as the prime question and subject of reason. The more that the question of God is relativized to this question of the human person, the more the human person and his capacities come to be absolutized.

An appreciation of these two challenges – the loss of the search for truth in a modern materialism and the absolutization of the human person – helps us to understand the ultimate rejection of God in the nineteenth century by philosophers such as Feuerbach (d. 1872), Marx (d. 1883) and Nietzsche (d. 1900). Once materialism is accepted as the explanation of reality, there is and can be no place for the existence of God except in the false imagination of the human person. Moreover, once this materialism twins with the conviction that the human person is prime, such false imaginings concerning a Supreme Being are actually considered a threat to the good of human life. We see these thoughts prevail in Feuerbach's teaching that religion, especially Christianity, is nothing other than an invention of humanity in its adolescence, and in his conviction that all theology is nothing other than anthropology. It is also present in Marx's conviction that religion is an "opiate" and, therefore, a destructive factor in what ought to be the movement of human individuals towards the fulfillment of themselves in a perfect society. It is left only for Nietzsche to declare the death of God, even if he claims that we have truly not yet grown up and do not know, in fact, why we have put God to death.

III. In the face of these two formidable challenges, let me conclude by offering three words of encouragement to you. I offer them to you for your

own personal growth in Christ Jesus, but with a greater audience in mind. As physicians and healers, you have a revered place in our society. Your own example and your faithfulness to Christ can and does serve as a great leaven to your brothers and sisters in the faith.

My first word of encouragement is that you stay steadfast in your search for the truth. You live not merely as practitioners of a science, but as men and women deeply committed to understanding the medicine you administer. Let your desire to understand the truth of your daily work inspire the natural desire in your minds to understand more and more the extraordinary truth of God's creation around you. Look at the world around you not merely in terms of its material dimensions and structure, but with an eye to the beauty that God created in every natural thing that exists on the earth and in the heavens. Beauty is the truth of the world that God created. Take another special look at the human person whom you serve every day, and see what God sees – the crown of his creation. There is not another creature in the heavens or on earth that shows forth more beautifully the very image of God. And when you hold that image of man in your sight, look to Christ who is the image of man made perfect. It is Christ who is our truth. It is in him that we understand who we are and why we were made.

A second word of encouragement. Engage the Church with your wisdom and your knowledge. Keep the dialogue between the Church and Science as healthy as it should be. Historically and sadly the relationship between the Church and Science has been a rocky one, one that has been filled – on both sides – with suspicion and censure. There is no need for such fracture and division. There is, in fact, a profound relationship between faith and reason, because God is the author of both. Would God have given us a faith that denied reason or emptied it of its beauty? Would he have given us the gift of reason to contradict faith or to show it to be empty? Because you are men and women of both science and faith, I encourage you to use the privileged opportunity you have to bring together the communities of science and of the faith to explore more fully the intersection of faith and reason, and the natural complexity and beauty of the world in which we live.

My third word of encouragement to you is the most simple, but the most important: Remain rooted in the Eucharist. It is at the Eucharist that we become most fully who we are, because it is there that the Lord Jesus unites himself to us; and we, by his grace, are united to him. May the life of Christ which you experience in the Eucharist be an abiding source of strength and satisfaction to each of you. May it nourish your thirst for the truth: the truth of the world and all in it, and the truth of God. And in your

gratitude for these gifts, may you profess and cherish your faith in Jesus Christ every day of your lives.

Thank you.