

**President's Text
Presidential Address**

**General Meeting
November 14, 2011**

"Love for Jesus and His Church must be the passion of our lives!"

My brother bishops: it is with that stunningly simple exhortation of Blessed Pope John II that I begin my remarks to you this morning.

"Love for Jesus and His Church must be the passion of our lives!"

You and I have as our sacred duty, arising from our intimate sacramental union with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to love, cherish, care for, protect, unite in truth, love, and faith . . . *to shepherd* . . . His Church.

You and I believe with all our heart and soul that *Christ and His Church are one*.

That truth has been passed on to us from our predecessors, the apostles, especially St. Paul, who learned that equation on the Road to Damascus, who teaches so tenderly that the Church is the bride of Christ, that the Church is the body of Christ, that *Christ and His Church are one*.

That truth has been defended by bishops before us, sometimes and yet even today, at the cost of “dungeon, fire, and sword.”

That truth -- that *He*, Christ, and *she*, His Church, are one -- moistens our eyes and puts a lump in our throat as we whisper with De Lubac, “For what would I ever know of Him, without her?”

Each year we return to this premier see of John Carroll to gather as brothers in service to *Him* and to *her*. We do business, follow the agenda, vote on documents, renew priorities and hear information reports.

But, one thing we can't help but remember, one lesson we knew before we got off the plane, train, or car, something we hardly needed to come to this venerable archdiocese to learn, is that “love for Jesus and His Church must be the passion of our lives!”

Perhaps, brethren, our most pressing pastoral challenge today is to reclaim that truth, to restore the luster, the credibility, the beauty of the Church “ever ancient, ever new,” renewing her as the face of Jesus, just as He is the face of God. Maybe our most urgent pastoral priority is to lead our people to see, meet, hear and embrace anew Jesus in and through *His Church*.

Because, as the chilling statistics we cannot ignore tell us, fewer and fewer of our beloved people -- to say nothing about those outside the household of the faith -

- are convinced that Jesus and His Church are one. As Father Ronald Rolheiser wonders, we may be living in a *post-ecclesial era*, as people seem to prefer

a King but not the kingdom,
a shepherd with no flock,
to believe without belonging,
a spiritual family with God as my father, as long as I'm
the only child,
"spirituality" without religion
faith without the faithful
Christ without His Church.

So they drift from her, get mad at the Church, grow lax, join another, or just give it all up.

If this does not cause us pastors to shudder, I do not know what will.

The reasons are multiple and well-rehearsed, and we need to take them seriously.

We are quick to add that good news about the Church abounds as well, with evidence galore that the majority of God's People hold fast to the revealed wisdom that Christ and His Church are one, with particularly refreshing news that young people, new converts, and new arrivals, are still magnetized by that truth, so clear to many of us only three months ago in Madrid, or six months ago at the Easter

Vigil, or daily in the wonderfully deep and radiant faith of Catholic immigrants who are still a most welcome -- -- while sadly harassed -- -- gift to the Church and the land we love.

But a pressing challenge to us it remains . . . to renew the appeal of the Church, and the Catholic conviction that Christ and His Church are one.

Next year, which we eagerly anticipate as a *Year of Faith*, marks a half-century since the opening of the Second Vatican Council, which showed us how the Church summons the world forward, not backward.

Our world would often have us believe that culture is light years ahead of a languishing, moribund Church.

But, of course, we realize the opposite is the case: the Church invites the world to a fresh, original place, not a musty or outdated one. It is always a risk for the world to hear the Church, for she dares the world to "cast out to the deep," to foster and protect the inviolable dignity of the human person and human life; to acknowledge the truth about life ingrained in reason and nature; to protect marriage and family; to embrace those suffering and struggling; to prefer service to selfishness; and never to stifle the liberty to quench the deep down thirst for the divine that the poets, philosophers, and peasants of the earth know to be what really makes us genuinely human.

The Church loves God's world like His only begotten Son did. She says *yes* to everything that is good, decent, honorable and ennobling about the world, and only says *no* when the world itself negates the dignity of the human person . . . and, as Father Robert Barron reminds us, "saying 'no' to a 'no' results in a 'yes'!"

To invite our own beloved people, and the world itself, to see Jesus and His Church as one is, of course, the task of the *New Evangelization*. Pope Benedict will undoubtedly speak to us about this during our nearing *ad limina* visits, and we eagerly anticipate as well next autumn's *Synod on the New Evangelization*. Jesus first called *fishermen* and then transformed them into *shepherds*. The *New Evangelization* prompts us to reclaim the role of fishermen. Perhaps we should begin to carry fishing poles instead of croziers.

Two simple observations might be timely as we as successors of the apostles embrace this urgent task of inviting our people and our world to see Jesus and His Church as one.

First, we resist the temptation to approach the Church as merely a system of organizational energy and support that requires maintenance.

As the Holy Father remarked just recently in his homeland of Germany, "Many see only the outward form of the Church. This makes the Church appear as merely one of the many organizations within a democratic society, whose criteria and laws

are then applied to . . . evaluating and dealing, with such a complex entity of the 'Church'."

The Church we passionately love is hardly some cumbersome, outmoded club of sticklers, with a medieval bureaucracy, silly human rules on fancy letterhead, one more movement rife with squabbles, opinions, and disagreement.

The Church is Jesus -- teaching, healing, saving, serving, inviting; Jesus often "bruised, derided, cursed, defiled."

The Church is a *communio*, a *supernatural family*. Most of us, praise God, are born into it, as we are into our human families. So, the Church is in our spiritual DNA. The Church is our home, our family.

In the *Power and the Glory*, when the young girl asks him why he just doesn't renounce his Catholic faith, the un-named "Whisky Priest" replies:

"That's impossible! There's no way! It's out of my power."

Graham Greene narrates: "The child listened intently. She then said, 'Oh, I see, like a birthmark'."

To use a Catholic word, Bingo! Our Church is like a birthmark. Founded by Christ, the Church had her beginning at Pentecost, but her origin is from the Trinity.

Yes, her beginning is in history, as was the incarnation, but her origin is outside of time.

Our urgent task to reclaim “love of Jesus and His Church as the passion of our lives” summons us not into ourselves but to Our Lord. Jesus prefers prophets, not programs; saints, not solutions; conversion of hearts, not calls to action; prayer, not protests: *Verbum Dei* rather than our verbage.

God calls us to be His children, saved by our oldest brother, Jesus, in a supernatural family called the Church.

Now, and here’s number two: since we are a spiritual family, we should hardly be surprised that the Church has troubles, problems . . . to use the talk-show vocabulary, that our supernatural family has some “dysfunction.”

As Dorothy Day remarked: "The Church is the radiant bride of Christ; but her members at times act more like the scarlet woman of Babylon."

It might seem, brother bishops, that the world wants us to forget every Church-teaching *except* for the one truth our culture is exuberantly eager to embrace and trumpet: the sinfulness of her members! That’s the one Catholic doctrine to which society bows its head and genuflects with crusading devotion!

We profess it, too. With contrition and deep regret, we acknowledge that the members of the Church -- starting with us -- are sinners!

One big difference: we who believe in Jesus Christ and His one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church interpret the sinfulness of her members *not* as a reason to dismiss the Church or her eternal truths, but to embrace her all the more! The sinfulness of the members of the Church reminds us precisely how much we need the Church. The sinfulness of her members is never an excuse, but a plea, to place ourselves at His wounded side on Calvary from which flows the sacramental life of the Church.

Like Him, she, too, has wounds. Instead of running from them, or hiding them, or denying them, she may be best showing them, like He did that first Easter night.

As Monsignor John Tracy Ellis used to introduce his courses on Church history, "Ladies and gentlemen, be prepared to discover that the Mystical Body of Christ has a lot of warts."

And we passionately love our bride with wrinkles, warts, and wounds all the more.

We bishops repent as well. At least twice a day -- at Mass, and at compline -- we ask Divine mercy. Often do we approach the Sacrament of Penance.

One thing both sides of the Catholic ideological spectrum at last agree upon is the answer to this question: who's to blame for people getting mad at or leaving the Church? Their unanimous answer?

. . . nice to meet you! We're the cause, they never tire of telling us.

Less shrill voices might comfort us by assuring us that's not true. Nice to hear . . .

But we are still sincere in often praying "mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa."

As Gregory the Great observed fifteen centuries ago: "the Church is fittingly pictured as dawn . . . dawn only hints that night is over. It does not reveal the full radiance of the day. While it indeed dispels the darkness and welcomes the light, it presents both of them . . . so does the Church."

Bishops, thanks for listening.

I look out at shepherds, fishermen, leaders, friends.

I look out at 300 brothers each of whom has a ring on his finger, because we're spoken for, we're married.

Our episcopal consecration has configured us so intimately to Jesus that He shares with us His bride, the Church.

There's nothing we enjoy doing more than helping our people, and everybody else, get to know Him and her better. That's our job description.

Because . . . "Love for Jesus and His Church is the passion of our lives!"