

Witnesses to Truth: A Spirituality to Sustain Us

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ABSTRACT: A society, living without reference to God, without a sense of life's meaning and great purpose, suffers from lack of acceptance, reconciliation, and love. Christian faith has a unique capacity to restore a civilization of love in the image of God who is Love. Such love affirms the other, first by being moved in delight by his/her good, and then by manifesting this delight. To love in this way, we must "be swept up by God." It is in worshipping Christ hidden in the Eucharist that we attune the eyes of our hearts to see in the unborn, the elderly, and the ill, the Image and Likeness of God. Seeing them with the love of God, we allow others to experience themselves as the sons and daughters of a God who loves gratuitously, accepting us as we are and transforming us into the people He knows we can be.

Witness: Moments in the Life of Faith

On this vigil of the feast of Pentecost, it is good to hear again the re-assuring and commanding words of the Lord: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses..., even to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). How often university campuses qualify as the existential ends of the earth! And it is you, His faithful disciples, whom Jesus commissions as surely today as He did His disciples on the day of His Ascension, with these same words: "You shall be my witnesses"(Acts 1:8).

Faith in an Age of Disbelief; Being Holy in an Unholy World

Before moving forward, let us take a brief look at the climate in which we are called to bear witness. I would like to share with you a couple of insights that are worthy of repeating from a talk given by Godfried Cardinal Danneels at a conference hosted by Josef Cardinal

Ratzinger in France in January 1983 entitled “Handing on the Faith in an Age of Disbelief.” Using psychological principles as an analog toward understanding the impact of faithlessness in society, Cardinal Danneels concluded:

As was the case more than a century ago with sexuality and aggressiveness, we have in our own day “repressed” another component of our human existence, driving it out of the consciousness into the subconscious, that is, the sense of God and of the transcendent. Someone who suffers in this way is not physically sick, but has a deficiency in simple joy: he is “vaguely sad.” The new neurosis is spiritual. The whole spiritual side of the person has been repressed.... He resembles those half-finished statues of Michelangelo that yearn to emerge from the marble and be set free. Such is man without God: he is incomprehensible in his profound abundance.¹

“[It is] Christ [who] fully reveals man to man himself.” This sense of the transcendent is precisely what makes man and woman human. If we want to be cured, will we not have to start pronouncing God’s name aloud again, speaking about him and giving him thanks? Will we not have to bear witness to Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?²

So little warmth. The fundamental reality that Jesus came to reveal to mankind is a God of love who is Father. When the father is gone, the children shiver from the cold. We are now in the middle of winter. Our whole civilization is as though frozen over; love, too. There is so little solidarity, so little warmth in society; we hear on our car radios, and streaming online news sources the daily dull, metallic sound of conflict and the silence of mistrust. We must rediscover our filial relationship with the Father.³

And recover the truth that there is nothing too much about us for God. This is the heart of the Gospel message, and the secret of healing. As the Apostle John says in his first letter: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). By becoming man, God accepted us as we are. We do not have to stand on tiptoe in order to

¹ Cf. Godfried Cardinal Danneels, “Christian Faith and the Worlds of Contemporary Man” in *Handing on the Faith in an Age of Disbelief* by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger et al. (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2006), pp. 125-26.

² Cf. Danneels, p. 126, including a quotation from Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, #22.

³ Cf. Danneels, pp. 128-29.

merit God's love. He does not consider our talents, our qualities, or even our good will before he loves us: He loves us gratuitously.... Through the Incarnation, the source of healing for mankind is manifested: God accepts us as we are. This is [the reality that] can cure us.⁴

Our Sisters had a delightful experience of this truth when they were out on a hike a few years ago. A woman came up to us and said, "Hello, Sisters of Life!!" and she told us a beautiful story. She said, "About ten years ago I came on a day-long retreat of hope and healing that changed my life." She had suffered an abortion years prior and, she told us, the retreat was amazing. She came away with her faith on fire, really knowing the Lord's love for her. She went to bed that night believing Jesus would show her her baby.

And that night she had a dream. She said, "I saw a little girl who looked like my daughter but I didn't know her. I could see her but she was in a different place than I was. There was some kind of communication between us (a strange dream-like reality difficult to describe), and I was filled with peace. Then I heard a male voice calling to her: 'Amanda, it's time to come home now.' The little girl turned to me and said, 'My Father is calling me now, I have to go.'"

Through all of this, the woman was still sleeping but by now she was on the end of her bed, kneeling and praising the Lord, hands in the air, tears streaming down her face. Her husband, startled, awoke her saying: "What's going on?" With a joy she had never known she recounted for him what had happened. She knew her life was changed forever. In an instant her goodness and innocence were restored, and shame banished!

A Dominican priest, Fr. Emmerich Vogt, puts it best: "There is nothing in your past that is not a part of God's loving plan for the future."⁵ God writes straight on crooked lines.

Lesson

As this woman's testifies and as Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium*, his first apostolic exhortation: "The Lord does not

⁴ Danneels, p. 131.

⁵ Fr. Emmerich Vogt, personal conversation, August 2010.

disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that He is already there, waiting for us with open arms.”⁶ Such is faith, and the restoration of faith in our age of unbelief.

The Truths to which We Bear Witness

Let us consider two beautiful truths that you, as the University Faculty for Life, hold dear – truths to which you have a special call to bear witness in your academic lives.

(1) *The incomparable dignity of the human person.* As stunning as the rest of creation is, nothing compares to the human person – to you, to me. The *Catechism* teaches us that the human person is the summit of creation. The Creator of all wills and loves each person into existence at the moment of their conception. This means that *you* were loved and willed into existence by God. He is loving you into existence right now. He chose you to exist – to share in His life; He created you as a completely unique, totally unrepeatable, living icon of His love.

(2) *We are chosen by God.* Pope Emeritus Benedict put it this way: “We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”⁷ No one is unwanted, no one is an accident. We are God’s sons and daughters. When we live out of this knowledge, we see and experience life differently.

As a society, we are living without reference to the mystery of God and suffering from a practical eclipse of any sense of God. It has left us and so many of the young without a sense of life’s meaning and great purpose – without anchor or compass.⁸ Many have heard the name, but have not encountered the person of Jesus Christ. Often we are tempted to forget who we are. It is like we have spiritual amnesia. We need to experience the reality that I am a son or a daughter of God.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* §3.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at the Mass for the Imposition of the Pallium and Conferral of the Fisherman’s Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome (24 April 2005).

⁸ Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* §21.

All My Dreams Came Back

This reminds me of a young woman whom I'll call "Monica." She lived nearby us in the Bronx and came into our lives one day several years ago. The Friars of the Renewal, recognizing that grace was stirring in her heart, introduced Monica to us Sisters and encouraged her to attend one of our Young Women's Retreats. Monica arrived complete with the accessories of her generation: tattoos and piercings, for a weekend retreat that would change her life and re-capture the hope that she needed to dream. The story is best told in her own words:

I didn't have the relationship a girl needs to have with her father. I had several broken relationships with men, and had seen a lot of abuse. I didn't know who I was. I felt unlovable, and yet, I still wanted to give myself away. I decided to go on a retreat (with the Sisters of Life) whose theme was "Perfect Love Casts Out Fear," and I really wanted to believe that was true.

One of the Sisters gave a conference on the dignity of being a woman, made in the image and likeness of God. When she described woman as the crowning glory of creation, something happened to me.... It dawned on me: I have so much to give! God made everything, and He decided to make me. The world needs me. I went to the Lord in prayer saying, "Jesus, show me how to be a woman. I need to know the truth about who I am." I had been living in a world of so much anger, feeling I could never be pure again.... That weekend, I knew God was saying, "You have dignity. You do not need to degrade yourself."

I understood then that I needed help, and it wasn't long before I was able to receive Christ's forgiveness. It made me cry because I knew I wasn't alone anymore.

And all my dreams came back.

I had yearned for a fairytale, for someone to come and save me! I reclaimed my freedom by accepting God's infinite love. I started sitting before the Blessed Sacrament because it was the one place where I felt "myself." I would just sit there and allow myself to be loved.

I started living, really living. I wanted to be the woman Christ made me to be. I could love myself, and give myself to Him. It was transforming. I now know that I am the daughter of a King. I know that I am beautiful; my body is beautiful. It took sacrifice, to live this way. Things changed for me – the way I saw and spoke with others. I started to really love people, seeing the good in them. I knew happiness was out there, but the joy of knowing Christ is like a never ending, eternal fire! What's more, I started wanting to see God, face to

face; I desired heaven. Now, [the prayer of the] Mass is what gets me through the day, through my life.... I can't be thankful enough.

Since that retreat Monica became a vibrant member and leader of the Catholic young adult community of the South Bronx, received a full academic scholarship and is nearing the completion of her studies at Ave Maria University – a dream she never before could have imagined for herself!

The Christian faith can be profoundly therapeutic in a world that suffers so much lack of acceptance, reconciliation, and love. It alone can restore a civilization of love modeled on the love with which God loves us. This love of God is realistic: for it is not based on the qualities of the person loved; rather [God] loves gratuitously, creating for himself the qualities he would like to see in the beloved.

Called to Communion: Why Such a Yearning?

As if that weren't enough, God desires to meet the one He creates, each unique person, in an intimate communion of love, and He has made that communion possible in Christ. We know His desire because we know our own desire: Inscribed into our hearts at the moment of conception is a longing for this intimate communion. It is as if the Blessed Trinity kisses us at the moment of creation and our souls remember that kiss of the Divine. His love is forever, and the Lord is no foolish lover. He knows that for the rest of our lives, we'll be searching for that which corresponds to this memory buried deep within us. His Love is inscribed in the depths of our being and we deeply yearn to love and be loved in the way He loves: limitless, complete, total. Our need for this kind of love is insatiable. And only He can satisfy it. Yes, each human person – no matter his or her background, no matter their socio-economic or cultural background, no matter their family situation or religious affiliation – is made in the image of God: precious, beloved, and given an untouchable, personal relationship with the Creator.

This call to communion is written into our very nature. The human person possesses an in-born capacity to turn toward the other, to “be with” another. This capacity is also simultaneously experienced as “vulnerability” – an incompleteness – creating the condition for true openness in human relationships. We were made in the image and

likeness of a God who is Love and Communion – and our lives image the Creator to the degree that our human relationships mirror the life-giving love at the heart of the Trinity. Human relationships are central to our identity as persons, both on the human and spiritual/supernatural dimensions. Human relationships are a necessary foundation for self-knowledge.

It is commonly understood that attacks upon the “communion of persons” are in essence attacks upon a Triune God, in whose Likeness we grow, through the purifying love of living human community life. Let me share with you, briefly, an encounter I had following a long week of meetings in St. Louis that illustrates this point. While they were wonderful, life-giving meetings by the end of the week, I was eager to get home. It was Saturday, and I checked the itinerary for the next day’s flight, and noticed that my dear Sister who had booked this flight had me flying from one city in the Midwest to another and another all day long. I would leave at eight in the morning and not arrive home until that evening. The mere thought of it made me grumpy and left me muttering: “Who did this to me?” And then just as quickly I said: “But I did take a vow of poverty.” With resignation I shot a prayer to Heaven, “All right God! Allow this to be a fruitful day, and allow me to see You at work!”

When I finally boarded the plane in Milwaukee the next day, for what would be the third and last leg of my journey home, I noticed a young woman who took the seat next to mine. She was in her late twenties or early thirties – very pretty, energetic – and had the look of someone who was altogether, rather “with it.” As the trip began, I was reading the latest book on Mother Teresa. After about twenty minutes I pulled out my prayer books and moved around to get organized. I smiled apologetically at the young woman who sat next to me. She leapt at the opportunity saying, “It’s funny you’re here. I’ve wanted to know about the Trinity.” I stared at her stunned. Whoever asks about the Trinity? Then, using the analogy of spousal love – the total, fruitful giving and receiving of love between spouses – as the best human comparison of the Trinitarian life of perfect self-giving, life-giving communion of love, I spoke of the Christian revelation and mystery of three Persons in one God.

“Karen” looked at me in amazement and said: “I knew that God was going to do something great with this trip. I’ve just about decided

to leave my marriage.” And thus began a conversation that would span half the country and end only as the wheels of the plane hit the tarmac at LaGuardia. Oh yes, the attack on marital love – the closest human analogy to the love and the life of God – was the first and is the oldest of the evil one’s strategies. It’s as old as Genesis; as old as Adam and Eve; a strategy used by the Enemy, codified in law, and normalized in practice by our society as a way to destroy man’s faith in the gift of human love, and ultimately in a God who is Love.

Before all else, we are persons called by Love into being for our own sakes, to love and to be loved; made for communion in community, both now and forever. The starting point for growth in faith is always the place of pain. There is a need experienced by contemporary men and women and teens, a need to discover the truth about oneself. That wound defines the struggle and points to the remedy.

Friendship of Mary

We do well to ponder Pope Francis’s call for a new Marian evangelization. Our Holy Father understands the depth of this wound to our souls. In the course of many addresses, interviews, and homilies last fall he repeatedly encouraged a new Marian evangelization for the Church. We see it in his vision of the Church as a “field hospital after battle”–and as a “mother and shepherdess” and by the way that he dreams of a Church that has “the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful.” The Church needs to have “nearness, proximity” to the people it serves. “The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people’s night, into the darkness, but without getting lost.”⁹

What is spiritual love in the image of God’s love?

Let us explore the reality of this Marian, spiritual love. Let us map out this love. What does it look like concretely? Spiritual love is the

⁹ Cf. Pope Francis, quoted in Antonio Spadaro, S.J., “A Big Heart Open to God: Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis,” *America Magazine* (September 30, 2013).

capacity to affirm the other, first by being moved in delight by the good of the other, and then by outwardly manifesting our delight. The interior first act of love is allowing oneself to be moved by the goodness, beauty, strength, and vulnerability of the other. Love, in a certain sense, is caused by the other who is attracting us, as it were, from within our own heart. This attraction moves us to desire and seek union with the good of the other person. As a movement within our heart and will, love is first an inclining toward the goodness of the other and only secondarily taking action for his/her good. We misunderstand the life of virtue and moral action if we put the emphasis solely on what I do for the other instead of what I do for the other *in response to having first been moved by the good of the other*. Ideally, the charitable acts that we do for another should be preceded by first being moved in love. Otherwise the other person is likely to get the impression that we love them *only* because we are good, and not because of any goodness within them that is moving us. *Affirmation of one's being lies precisely in the realization that it is the goodness of his or her being that is the cause of my delight*. Such affirmation is the source of new psychic birth. Far from sentimentality, this is love in the image of the God who is Love and loves with a love of predilection. It is the way of God's love, and it requires courage and fortitude to look beyond the "distressing disguises" of the poor and vulnerable to love them with consistency, perseverance, courage and delight.

The Power of Love

Let me share with you an example of the power of such love. A woman we had served returned to visit the Sisters several years after living with us, and upon her return she was so proud to tell us of her new and many accomplishments. She ran through a list of all the good news: she had graduated with a professional degree in nursing; she was confident of a good first job; and she had surprised herself by decorating her apartment beautifully, which was a tangible expression of her own new sense of self-worth. Finally, she completed the picture by musing: "You know it's funny: I'm just beginning to experience myself as the person you always knew me to be!"

We who love with the love of Jesus grow in virtue by acting on behalf of another. Yet this giving is within the context of having first

interiorly received something of the goodness of the other. It is God's way of loving; it is a love of predilection, of preference. The one who loves in this way can authentically say: "It is I who receive the greater part in having loved and served you." Every person needs unconditional love and affirmation from some one in a one-to-one experience of fidelity and trust. Such love is but prelude to salvation, which is relational existence lived in perfect love eternally.

Because of the strength of this love, it was Mary near whom the Apostles gathered in fear as they awaited the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. Let us ask Mary to lead us to image this Marian love to those who seek Christ without knowing what or whom they are seeking.

Eucharist – God with us

In the gift of the Eucharist Jesus fulfills the promise He made: "I will be with you always, even until the end of time" (Mt 28:20). The failure of so many of our family members, friends, and Catholic colleagues to recognize and treasure the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is linked, I believe, to our failure as a people to recognize the inviolable dignity of the human person. For the same faith that allows us to see Jesus Christ hidden in the Host attunes the eyes of our hearts to see in the unborn, the frail elderly, the chronically and terminally ill, the image and likeness of God.

To be Eucharistic is “to be swept up by God.” Cardinal O’Connor would often tell a story, especially to priests, of a Maryknoll priest whom he had encountered, a priest who shared with him his missionary experience in China and the power of the Eucharistic Presence. The following is the story, told in the Cardinal’s words:

Maryknoll priests are not permitted in mainland China as priests. They are accepted as university professors in various of the physical disciplines. He [this priest] taught physics at the University of Beijing. He was required to wear lay clothes. He lived in an apartment. He had no parish. There was no such thing as a parish. He could not say the Mass publicly. He stopped offering Mass altogether.

Each day he would go into his class to teach physics. The students listened with a certain interest for their own advantage in learning modern physics. Then one day he asked himself, “What am I doing here? I know that it is the long-range objective of Maryknoll by getting some of us here as professors, is to pave the way for our coming here one day as identifiable missionaries. Is this enough? I am a priest.”

He began offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass everyday in private in his little apartment. He said: “My whole being changed; my awareness of myself as a priest, but far more. My awareness of the presence of Christ and my recognition of the fact that nothing I could say in a classroom or in a pulpit, would be comparable to the power of the crucifixion and death and resurrection of our Divine Lord, relived spiritually and mysteriously in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. [The] explosive dynamic of the Mass, I recognized as radiating outwardly throughout the length and breath of China.”

Then came the student uprising at Tiananmen Square and the massacre of those students that followed. He said immediately after classes resumed the students began coming to him and saying to him, “At a particular point we noticed that something happened to you. When you came into the classroom you seemed to us to be a man who believed in something you had not believed in before. We are desperate. All our dreams are shattered. All our hopes are destroyed. Would you tell us what it is that you believe?” Then and only then, was he able to begin preaching to them about Christ – the suffering Christ; the wounded Christ; the Christ crucified out of love for them; the Christ risen; the Christ who wanted nothing more than to help them rise with Him. This is the power of the Eucharistic Christ. It is the power that is ours if we truly believe in this Christ.”¹⁰

¹⁰ John Cardinal O’Connor. *Sisters of Life*. 11th Discernment Retreat.

Cardinal O'Connor would say, "The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is *the* great act of contemplation, in which ...each of us has the opportunity to become completely lost in God, to be swept up by God...to be changed from what we are into what God wants us to be as the bread is changed into the Body of Christ."¹¹

To share this Eucharistic faith with others, we must first receive it as gift. With such a grace we will become missionaries, for love compels us, of the Eucharistic Christ who is life, and like the Apostle John proclaim:

that which was from the beginning,
which we have heard,
which we have seen with our own eyes;
which we have looked upon
and our hands have touched:
the Word, who is life. (1 John 1:1)

Homily at Mass on July 4, 1996.

¹¹ John Cardinal O'Connor. *Sisters of Life*. 1st Discernment Retreat. Conference 9 on October 26, 1990, emphasis added.