

Springtime of Faith Conference

The Toolbox of Pope Benedict

Nashville

15 May 2010

Dear brother priests, dear Sisters and seminarians, dear young people and friends in Christ:

Introduction

What a thrill it is for me to be with you this afternoon to celebrate the vigor, beauty and wonder of the Catholic faith with you, to savor your enthusiasm for proclaiming the Good News to the whole creation (cf. Mk 16:15). As Peter said to the Lord on Mount Tabor, “it is good for us to be here” (Mk 9:5). It is good because, when we experience the Spirit in our midst, we are emboldened to push the frontiers of our apostolic endeavors, to cast aside the lingering sloth that holds us in check and to shout from the rooftops that Jesus Christ is Lord: “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

In this talk I would like to offer some reflections drawn from the teachings of Pope Benedict on how we can be better prepared to assume our mission of being instruments working for the “new springtime,” a mission entrusted to each of us at this juncture of history.

1. Benedict and the “New Springtime”

While John Paul II, with all the prophetic intuition that marked his entire pontificate, launched the appeal for a “new springtime of

Christianity,”¹ it has fallen to Benedict XVI to give it shape in our day.

Benedict does use the language of “springtime” in various ways to express his hope that

We can and must believe, with the late Pope John Paul II, that God is preparing a new springtime for Christianity (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 86). What is needed above all, at this time in the history of the Church in America, is a renewal of that apostolic zeal . . . to seek out the lost, to bind up those who have been wounded, and to bring strength to those who are languishing (cf. Ez 34:16).²

¹ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 2; cf. 86.

² Benedict XVI, Responses to Questions Posed by the American Bishops, Washington (16 April 2008).

The springtime is, then, linked to “a renewal of apostolic zeal.” It calls for courage, and a zest in proclamation in the immediate environs where we live our daily lives. During his visit to the United States two years ago, the Holy Father concluded his homily at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York by sending forth the faithful “as heralds of hope in the midst of . . . all those places where God’s grace has placed us. In this way, the Church in America will know a new springtime in the Spirit.”³

I would like to take from the toolbox of the Holy Father’s rich teaching three themes that, I believe, will enable us to carry out our mission more effectively: first, the importance of friendship with Christ; second, the need to propose the message with joy; and third, the need always to be ready to give an accounting of the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pt 3:16). Three imperatives emerge from Benedict: be a friend; be joyful; be ready to explain.

2. Nothing More Beautiful than Friendship with Christ

We all know that all renewal begins with a recommitment to holiness: “a clearer focus upon the imitation of Christ in holiness of life

³ Benedict XVI, Homily, New York (19 April 2008); cf. “I am confident that through the power of the Holy Spirit and the motherly assistance of the Virgin Mary, we will see a great springtime of hope in Germany, in Europe and throughout the world” (Benedict XVI, General Audience [24 August 2005]). And, more recently, the Pope invited all priests, during this Year dedicated to them, “to welcome the new springtime which the Spirit is now bringing about in the Church” (Benedict XVI, Letter Proclaiming the Year for Priests [16 June 2009]).

is exactly what is needed in order for us to move forward. We need to rediscover the joy of living a Christ-centered life.”⁴ The Pope never tires of reminding us that God is near: “It is in loving friendship with him that the fullness of life is to be found.”⁵

In line with the teaching of his predecessor, but giving it even more emphasis, is the present Holy Father’s insistence – and he repeats this in many, many discourses – on our being “friends” with the Lord. For him, this is the key to being a holy disciple. Very often he cites this Johannine text from the Last Supper: “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15).

⁴ Benedict XVI, Homily at Vespers with American Bishops (16 April 2008).

⁵ Benedict XVI, Address to Disadvantaged Young People, Sydney (18 July 2008).

Indeed, the purest joy lies in the relationship with him [Christ], encountered, followed, known and loved, thanks to a constant effort of mind and heart. To be a disciple of Christ: for a Christian this suffices. Friendship with the Teacher guarantees profound peace and serenity to the soul even in the dark moments and in the most arduous trials. When faith meets with dark nights, in which the presence of God is no longer “felt” or “seen,” friendship with Jesus guarantees that in reality nothing can ever separate us from his love (cf. Rom 8:39).⁶

Sharing Friendship

⁶ Benedict XVI, Angelus (15 January 2006). Cf. Address to the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy (2 June 2007): “For you this requires, in the first place, a personal and profound experience of the Incarnate God, an intimate friendship with Jesus, in whose Name the Church sends you for a singular apostolic duty. You know that the Christian faith cannot be reduced to mere intellectual knowledge of Christ and his doctrine.”

Moreover, our friendship with Christ is to be shared. “Friendship with Jesus is such a beautiful gift that it cannot be kept for oneself! Those who receive this gift feel the need to pass it on to others, and so when the gift is shared it is not reduced but rather is multiplied!”⁷ In his first great homily as Pope, Benedict commented: “There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know him and to speak to others of our friendship with him.”⁸ Friendship with the Lord is the soil of springtime, the soul of discipleship.

⁷ Benedict XVI, Letter to the Children of the Pontifical Missionary Childhood Society (3 September 2007).

⁸ Benedict XVI, Homily at the Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome (24 April 2005).

Jesus chose the Twelve primarily “to be with him” (Mk 3: 14); that is, they were “to share in his life and learn directly from him not only the style of his behavior, but above all who he really was. Only in this way, taking part in his life, could they get to know him and subsequently, proclaim him.”⁹ Indeed, “they were not to proclaim an idea, but to witness to a person.”¹⁰ Friendship is a “being with” the one loved, what St. John refers to as “abiding with,” staying with the beloved (cf. Jn 1:35-42).

For the Holy Father, friendship with the Lord is “having “the same mind . . . that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5):

Friendship means sharing in thought and will. We must put into practice this communion of thought with Jesus, as St. Paul tells us in his Letter to the Philippians (cf. 2:2-5). And this communion of thought is not a purely intellectual thing, but a sharing of sentiments and will, hence, also of actions. This means that we should know Jesus in an increasingly personal way, listening to him, living with him, staying with him.¹¹

“Your attitude must be that of Christ” (Phil 2: 5): to think with

⁹ Benedict XVI, General Audience (6 September 2006).

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, General Audience (26 March 2006).

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Homily at Chrism Mass (13 April 2006).

Christ; to think with Christ's thoughts.¹²

¹² Cf. Benedict XVI, Reflection at the Synod of Bishops (3 October 2008).

Today, more than ever, holiness – friendship with Jesus – is a pressing need if spring is to follow winter since people are looking for the clear and attractive testimony of a consistent and exemplary life. Consequently, “we need to find new ways to pass on to young people the beauty and richness of friendship with Jesus Christ in the communion of his Church.”¹³

3. Joyful Proclamation

“Personal friendship with Christ fills us with genuine, lasting joy and makes us ready to put into effect God’s plan for our life.”¹⁴

Friendship and joy go together. Being holy is not being serious or sad. As the great St. Teresa of Ávila once prayed: “From sour-faced saints, O Lord, deliver us!” There are already enough people whose sad-sack demeanour and underlying anger masquerade as righteousness.

Joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the person. In this sense, it is unmerited, a grace. Pope Benedict has commented on the relationship between joy and the Holy Spirit:

¹³ Benedict XVI, Letter to the Catholics of Ireland (19 March 2010).

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, Address to Young People, Czech Republic (28 September 2009).

It [Joy] can only be offered as a gift; and, in fact, has been given to us in abundance: it is by this that we are known. . . . The Holy Spirit gives us joy. And he is joy. Joy is the gift in which all the other gifts are included. It is the expression of happiness, of being in harmony with ourselves, that which can only come from being in harmony with God and with his creation. It belongs to the nature of joy to be radiant, it must communicate itself. The missionary spirit of the Church is none other than the impulse to communicate the joy which has been given.¹⁵

The Church needs joyful evangelizers who share the hope of a new springtime. As Jesus said on the very night of his betrayal and agony: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you . . . that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete” (Jn 14:27; Jn 15:11).

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia (22 December 2008).

Christianity gives us joy, because love gives joy. Yet love is always a process of losing oneself, of coming out of oneself, of squandering oneself in imitation of Christ who did not grasp his equality with God but “emptied himself” even to death on the Cross (cf. Phil 2:6-7). Joy develops on the path of love, and this path of love passes through the Cross to communion with the Crucified Christ. “If I can be convinced that the person who loves me is beside me even in troubling situations, in the depths of my heart dwells a joy that is greater than all suffering.”¹⁶ The source of joy, then, is recognizing God’s overwhelming love for us, a love unmerited and undeserved. He has loved me “first” and therefore has made me – fragile and sinful *me* – lovable and capable of loving.

The great spiritual writer, Blessed Abbot Marmion, wrote: “Joy is the echo of God’s life within us.” That echo is the work of grace in us, God really dwelling within my soul.

4. Giving an Account of Our Hope

Now to my last point. Pope Benedict forcefully and frequently calls to our attention the need to engage contemporary culture not only by the witness of a joyful life of friendship with God but also by a careful presentation of truth which is well-argued and persuasive. When dealing with those whose faith is weak, or who are questioning and even

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, Reflection at the Synod of Bishops (3 October 2005).

possibly antagonistic, it is not enough simply to repeat *verbatim* the truths of Christianity. The Pope's distinguished theological works tell us differently. He wants to lead his interlocutors to grasp the reasonableness of Christianity. He likes to cite the text in St. Peter's First Letter: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you" (1 Pt 3:15).

Reasoned Defense

From Benedict's toolbox we need to follow his example of being ready to *explain* what we believe, not just recite it. He is a rigorous thinker who does not recoil before the intellectual challenges confronting the Catholic faith. Just as St. Peter demanded, he is ready to defend the faith before those who demand an accounting of it (cf. 1 Pt 3:15); and he is doing so brilliantly.

Here I would like to mention how closely Benedict models his approach to his interlocutors on that taken long ago by St. Thomas Aquinas. As his magisterial lecture at Regensburg has shown, he is willing to engage in intellectual dialogue. Like Thomas, he shows great liberty of spirit and intellectual honesty in dealing with new questions.

Aquinas was ever alert to the truth buried in the opinion of others: "There is no false teaching which does not have some truth admixed in

it,”¹⁷ he affirmed. In his unrelenting search for truth, Thomas recognized that the Holy Spirit was already at work, opening the human heart and making it ready to welcome the truth of the Gospel. In a celebrated phrase he stated: “any truth, no matter by whom it is spoken, is from the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸

In addressing the Pontifical Academies this past January, the Pope praised St. Thomas for his approach, suggesting that it is a way that a lot of us could follow. He notes that Thomas engaged in “a fruitful confrontation both with the Arab and the Jewish thinking in his time,” set store by the Greek philosophical tradition, and from that he “produced an extraordinary theological synthesis, fully harmonizing reason and faith.” His pedagogical originality was striking. He was not afraid to resolve questions in a new and clearer way with new arguments, and to develop new theses and new methods. According to the Holy Father,

¹⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. **.

¹⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 109, a. 1, ad 1: “omne verum a quocumque dicatur a Spiritu Sancto est.”

St. Thomas Aquinas' thought and witness suggest that we should study emerging problems with great attention in order to offer appropriate and creative responses. Confident in the possibilities of "human reason," in full fidelity to the immutable *depositum fidei*, we must, as the *Doctor Communis* did, always draw from the riches of Tradition, in the constant search for "the truth of things."¹⁹

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, Address to the 14th Public Session of the Pontifical Academies (28 January 2010).

The new springtime of faith will not result from a comforting fideism, where reason is cast aside or critical arguments ignored. Repeatedly Pope Benedict insists that we need to emphasize “the harmony between reason and faith, dimensions of the human spirit that are completely fulfilled in the encounter and dialogue with one another.”²⁰ Moreover, “an intellectual ‘culture’ which is genuinely Catholic” must be “confident in the profound harmony of faith and reason.”²¹ The synergy between the two is the linchpin of Benedict’s thought.

The Pope is convinced that it is urgent for contemporary thinkers “to rediscover anew human rationality open to the light of the divine *Logos* and his perfect revelation which is Jesus Christ, Son of God made man.”²² For Benedict, it is the Christian faith which safeguards reason today. Faith liberates reason from its inherent limitations; it cannot reach the transcendent.

God has revealed himself as creative Reason. The divine *Logos* is thus the origin of the universe: “in the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1).

²⁰ Benedict XVI, Angelus (28 January 2007).

²¹ Benedict XVI, Homily at Nationals Stadium, Washington (17 April 2008); cf. The Holy Father affirms that “a natural friendship exists between faith and reason, founded in the order of Creation itself” (Benedict XVI, General Audience [28 October 2009]).

²² Benedict XVI, Address at the University of Regensburg (12 September 2006).

Precisely as the *Logos*, he “became flesh” (Jn 1:14). This same *Logos* was united once and for all with humanity, the world and history, in Christ.²³

²³ Cf. Benedict XVI, Address to the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (25 November 2005).

Because God is Reason, our faith, therefore, has something to do with reason; it has no cause to hide from it. On the contrary, whenever faith in God separates itself from a rational foundation, they put such a faith at risk.²⁴ Without the light of faith, however, human reason cannot find sure and fulfilling answers to today's many urgent problems. We need to be prepared, not by gimmicks, but by prayerful and serious study to give to others an accounting of our faith

Conclusion

The Benedictine tool box for the new springtime, therefore, contains many useful instruments. Above all, it grounds all contemporary evangelization in a profound friendship with the Lord. Secondly, the primary instrument of the mission is joy; we are effective to the extent that we are “servants of God’s joy.” And, lastly, we must be formed in the Church’s faith so that we can give a persuasive and reasonable account for our hope in Jesus Christ.

²⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, Address at the University of Regensburg (12 September 2006).

In its deepest core the world is waiting for you to bring it the hope, joy and beauty of knowing Christ. The harvest is ready and plentiful, but God wishes to enlist helpers to bring it into his storehouse. He needs you, dear friends in Christ. The Lord asks for our help so that “this harvest which is ripening in people’s hearts may truly be brought into the storehouses of eternity and become an enduring, divine communion of joy and love.”²⁵

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²⁵ Benedict XVI, Meeting with Priests and Permanent Deacons of Bavaria (14 September 2006).