

PRECIOUS BLOOD CONVOCATION 2010

"Who Will Speak the Word to Rouse them?

I Can, I Must, I Will. Will You?:

Preaching in the Public Square

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The Woman at the Well has been the theme of your gathering. It is a paradigm for your ministry because it is a multi-faceted encounter, one that reflects the five essential facets of Precious Blood Spirituality.

It is first of all a *personal* encounter between Jesus and the woman; it is a *political* encounter because she was an outsider; it is a *prophetic* encounter because it challenged prevailing cultural norms and offered a different model of salvation; and it is above all a *sacramental* encounter, because in Jesus, the woman met God's grace incarnate. As a result, it was a conversation experience for her, a reconciliation. And it was an *evangelical* encounter, since afterward, the woman became a preacher.

Religious communities have always had a special role to play in the Church, and much of what we do is based on facilitating the kind of encounter the woman had with Jesus. In health care, education, pastoral care, preaching, and service to the poor ---we are all about making room for this holy encounter. Our communities prepare us for these encounters, and we in turn provide a place for others to have these encounters.

Yet there are many obstacles to making this happen.

There is too much noise in our world and there is a need for silence to allow a sacred encounter to take place.

We also suffer from too much affluence: Jesus' encounter with the woman was utterly simple – him and her and a cup of water. Even then, she didn't get it – she missed the point about water; it was only a commodity to her; no spiritual, metaphorical or sacramental significance. In a similar way, we miss the transcendent because we can't see through our many possessions and material concerns.

Tribalism is another threat to authentic encounter. You all know about "Nimbys," an acronym for those who object "not in my backyard" to any community need – whether it is a prison, a new parking lot for the school, a power transmission tower, a wind farm.

Today that has gone a step further, as we retreat into our well-insulated enclaves, so that it is “only in my back yard.” Our cable TV enables us to listen only to those who agree with us; we live in neighborhoods with people who are just like us; we drive up to homes that have garage doors instead of front porches; we go in, close the door and live our lives in the back yard, without any real connection to others. We reject ecological and environmental concerns because we have no common interest greater than our individual interests. Meanwhile, stores and websites constantly gather information about us, linking us to our purchases, creating artificial marketing communities that are only for the sake of selling us more things.

And of course, scandal is an obstacle, when the church itself becomes an impediment to faith rather than a sacrament and an occasion of grace.

In his recent book on future trends, Vatican correspondent John Allen, cites the rise of Pentecostalism: based on a desire for direct, personal religious experience, unmediated by institutions.

He says Pentecostalism includes a Belief in the gifts of the Holy spirit, and tongues, prophecy or healing, literal reading of the bible, divine healing or injury, possibility of direct divine revelation, emphasis on evil spirits, belief in the Rapture, and that God will return in my lifetime (think of the popularity of the “Left Behind” books). While Pentecostalism is a valid form of faith, it challenges us as Catholics who are so deeply invested in institutions and sacramentality. This is especially important if our institutions have scandalized believers and caused them to seek their encounter with Christ in non-institutional ways.

Another obstacle is jingoism, an aggressive, narrow-minded patriotism, and failure to recognize that today’s world is no longer black and white – it is now multi-polar. America is still a great world power and has great power to do good; but we must have a certain humility and recognize that there are other important forces in the world. We are no longer just exporting our culture (and theology); we must begin to learn from Africa, Asia and Latin America. We must come to see that our interests are now inextricably intertwined with the rest of the world and that we cannot act unilaterally. Any authentic American spirituality must lead us to collaboration rather than confrontation.

These are just a few of the things that make it difficult to foster a sacramental encounter, especially if we are part of an institutional Church.

I hope you’ll indulge me if fall back on my Dominican background and use preaching as a metaphor for ministry, since it is one of the primary ways in which create this encounter can take place is by preaching. Preaching is

always a dialogue, yet it is a complex, multifaceted activity. What do we mean by “preaching” in the Catholic tradition?

If you are a preacher yourself, take a moment to think about what you do when you preach. If you are a hearer of preaching, as yourself, what do you expect from the preachers you hear.

George Sweazy once described a number of things that preachers might do when they preach. He said it could involve “closing **the gap**” between what the Bible offers and what the people need; it could involve proclaiming **God’s Mighty acts** or “kerygmatic preaching.” (Unfortunately, C.H. Dodd once said that “Much of our preaching in the Church today would not have been recognized by the early Church as kerygma.”)

It might involve helping people encounter Christ, not a eulogy; but sacramental preaching that reveals Christ as a real, living person. It might involve **teaching, or sustaining and comforting**.

Because preaching is not just an intellectual exercise, it might involve schooling the emotions. Our preaching is not just intellectual, we also shape people’s affections or emotions. (See Jonathan Edwards on “schooling the affections” and also Aquinas, who asks in what appears to be a rather arcane question [ST 2-2, q. 177]: “Whether any gratuitous grace attaches to words?” Aquinas says there are three ways in which grace attaches to words, for the benefit of others: 1) In order to instruct the intellect, e.g., to teach; 2) In order that we may hearken to the Word of God; 3) *In order that we may love that which is signified by the Word, and the desire to fulfill it. Thus when one speaks to sway his hearers...*” Our preaching deepens love and desire.

We shy away from it today, but sometimes preaching involves Judgment: Declaring God’s judgment on private and social wrong; or **Urging decision**, e.g., Jesus: “Come Follow me...” “Believe...” “Leave all things...” or action. **Shouldn’t preaching always move us to do something?**

Preaching should shape character and form virtue. And it might **incite the believer to imagine, to know God** through non-rational, non-didactic preaching, using poetry, metaphor. Similar to the role of art in religious inspiration.

As theologian Mary Catherine Hilker O.P., has pointed out, there are two primary ways of understanding the preaching act. One way is based on a dialectical imagination or view of the world, which stresses human sinfulness, the distance between God and humanity, and the paradox of the Cross. This is typical of much Protestant preaching.

Catholics, however, favor another view, based on a sacramental imagination which emphasizes the presence of the God who is self-communicating love, the creation of human beings in the image of God, the mystery of the incarnation, grace as divinizing as well as forgiving, the mediating role of the Church as sacrament of salvation in the world, and the ‘foretaste of the reign of God that is present in the community...’ (13)

Often preachers operate as if the word of God is to be discovered only in the biblical passage, in prayer and in the study of commentaries...

But the sacramental imagination takes a different perspective, asserting that God’s word of salvation, hope, healing and liberation is being spoken of in new ways today in people’s daily lives....

Therefore, reflection on culture, people’s lives, and human experience is necessary not merely to make a homily relevant, but to hear God’s word today. From the sacramental perspective, preachers listen with attentiveness to human experience because they are convinced that *revelation is located in human history, in the depths of human experience...* (48-49)

So for us, preaching and ministry in general, is not reaching up and “pulling heaven down” for people, but “naming grace” that is already present in human life, history and experience. Sometimes that is hard work, yet we are called to believe that is possible, and to act as though it were. Our first word as ministers is not “sin,” but “grace.”

It is also important that our ministry has two directions. The more typical kind of ministry is internal to the Church. We preach, we offer pastoral care, we console, we heal in order to build up the inner life and dynamism of the community of believers.

But there is another kind of ministry, one that is directed outward, to the world around us. It is not geared primarily to building up the inner life of the Church, but rather to building up the common good. We do this by collaborating with others who may not share our faith convictions, but who also seek a happiness in a community that allows human flourishing.

This external ministry involves education, health care, advocacy and involvement with political life. Because it aims at the common good, it also aims at the reign of God. Every time we make human life a little more just, a little more equitable, a little more educated, we “pull the veil back” on God’s own kingdom. We show others that grace is in the world, and give them a taste of what God’s life is like.

This kind of ministry is based on a certain relationship with the world around us.

Catholics do not try to impose their faith on the world around us, saying “This is true and you’re going to like it.”

Neither do we retreat into private communities of faith because we fear contamination by the world around us. We take the risk of compromise because we believe the common good is born of collaboration.

Nor do we believe faith is merely a private matter that has no political or social implications.

Rather, we engage in what I would call “persuasive collaboration.” We try to persuade the world of the truth of our convictions, but we are also willing to collaborate and settle for less than 100% if we can advance the common good. This attitude is what has enabled our vast institutional commitments in health care and education.

C O N C L U S I O N

What does the world need from you now?
How do you rouse them?

Let me conclude by offering a few suggestions about what should characterize our ministry in this present time. Together, they constitute what I believe would involve a prophetic dimension to Precious Blood spirituality.

First of all, we must help renew our reverence for institutions. All of our founders were institutional people – they believed in the Gospel, but they also believed that it was necessary to institutionalize our tradition and our values so that they would survive history and human ambivalence.

I believe the trend to privacy, tribalism and self-interest threatens our institutions and renders the common good impossible. Hugh Hecllo wrote a book entitled “On Thinking Institutionally,” and in it, he says that “thinking institutionally is a counter-cultural act.” As religious, we are hugely invested in institutions – not just brick and mortar, but communities and structures and perpetuating charisms and missions.

Institutions are durable – but not like a weather-worn rock. They are alive and organic...they are constantly reborn, shaped by their times and culture. Our institutions can be an important counter-balance to corporate institutions which do not always act for the common good.

Second, we need to deepen our awareness of and commitment to the common good, to the belief that we have a common life together that is greater than the sum of its parts.

We do not have an operative notion of the common good in the US. We live under the illusion that adding up individual choices and freedom will create a culture that will enable us to flourish – but free economic exchange is not enough. Justice is not just a matter of rights, especially forbearance rights, but a web of relationships

A real commitment to the common good requires the virtue of solidarity: Jesus and the woman at the well, the kind of relationship that Jesus established with the woman at the well. He created a bond that said, “We are all in this together.”

Finally the most important aspect of our prophetic task may be to foster contemplation as an antidote to the noise and narrowness that plagues us as a culture.

You may recall reading Kathleen Norris’ books; in one of them she recounts how she tried to get a group of 4th graders to understand poetry by having them experience absolute silence. When she finally got the group quieted down and got them to sit in silence for several minutes, she asked them what it was like. One of them raised his hand and said, “It’s scary.” And it is.

True silence, which leads to contemplation is not just staring into the abyss; it is taking time and creating a place where we can see reality as it truly is and God’s presence in it. This can be frightening, but it can also help us see God’s hand and the presence of grace in the world around us.

Thomas Merton once said, “One of the most important – and neglected – elements in the beginnings of the interior life is the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendor that is all around us in the creatures of God.” (*No Man is an Island*, 33)

Can our ministry be understood as helping others to encounter Christ through contemplative experience of ordinary things?

The medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, in her “Illuminations,” once described this experience of contemplation in an utterly simple way:

And in this he [Christ] showed me something small, not bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, it was round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: what can this be?

I was amazed that it could last for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God. (Luke Timothy Johnson,

“Dry Bones: Why Religion Can’t Live without Mysticism” *Commonweal*
February 26, 2010)

My brothers and sisters, you gather here these days to celebrate the great gift of your Precious Blood Charism, given both for your own perfection and for the world you serve. May this be a time for you to renew your prophetic ministry, one that deepens our reverence for institutions, which have been with us as Christ’s sacramental presence to the world; to deepen our love of the common good; and above all, to cultivate contemplation and as another founder, St. Dominic said, “to share the fruits of that contemplation with others.”

If we can do those three things, then surely, we have glimpsed a bit of God’s reign.