

First preach by the way you live: Bishops and the new evangelization

By Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap. presented the following speech to the Synod of Bishops for America which took place Nov. 16-Dec. 12 2002 in Rome.

The memories of World Youth Day 1993 remain very vivid for the Church of Denver. And so before I begin, I need to tell you that I bring with me to Rome great affection from my people back home—not only for the Holy Father, but for all of you who joined in that extraordinary gathering of young people four years ago.

We need to remember the World Youth Day celebrations, because they are a powerful sign of hope. Throughout this synod we are discussing serious matters. If we truly seek conversion, community and solidarity, we need to be completely frank with one another as brothers. But in doing so, we should also take heart from the fact that young people will continue to have a deep hunger for God. With good teaching and good pastors, they will continue to hear the voice of Jesus Christ, and they will respond.

The nature of being a "good pastor" is what I want to focus on today. We preach best, and teach best, by our personal example. Anything which enables us to do that—as bishops—is good. Anything which prevents us from doing that, is not. Each one of us wants to minister to God's people more fruitfully in the new millennium. But I believe this requires us to change—as individuals and as bishops.

We need, first of all, to become simple again. By that I mean, Gospel simple. Jesus loved simplicity because it allowed Him to immerse Himself in the essential things of His Father's business. I believe we are in danger of losing that Christ-like focus as bishops. Our hemisphere has become a culture of noise, confusion and complication. We are a distracted people, both North and South, and we are now also a distracted Church. We have plans and committees and projects and staffs. All these things are important in their proper place. But at the end of the day, are we apostles . . . or are we executives? And what do our people really need: managers . . . or pastors?

My concern is that the structures of today's diocesan life too frequently prevent the very thing they were meant to help: a bishop's direct contact with his people. Obviously, good stewardship requires skilled management of our resources. But it is too easy today for a bishop to abdicate his missionary zeal to others, and become a captive of his own administrative machinery. This runs exactly counter to the example of Jesus and the first apostles.

We bishops need to be much more radical in our own Christian vocation. By "radical," I mean oriented toward the root. Charles Borromeo once said to his priests, "Be sure you first preach by the way you live." The synod's instrumentum laboris is, in some ways, too gentle toward all of us. Many of the problems we face as shepherds are not programmatic or resource-driven. They are problems of faith. Too often, those of us in the Church—and even we bishops—simply do not believe deeply and zealously enough.

Today, throughout our hemisphere, many of our people have found consumer capitalism to be much more appealing than the Gospel. Capitalism is a machine that works. It gets results. This is important, because as our economies and cultures interlock, consumerism and the practical atheism it breeds are now common problems throughout our hemisphere.

Yet the hunger for God persists in every human heart, even when it's buried under consumer goods. And too often, we are not feeding that hunger as effectively as the fundamentalists and other evangelical Christians. I understand the frustration of my Latin American brothers very well when they talk about the invasion of aggressive religious sects into their countries. I face many of the same pastoral problems in northern Colorado. Hundreds of my own people leave the Catholic faith every year to join these fundamentalist groups.

The Church throughout our hemisphere needs to recover her original spiritual fire, which these groups now so successfully copy. We need to lead people back to the fullness of Jesus Christ,

which can only be found in sacramental community and especially in the Eucharist. But how can we accomplish that? If we really want conversion, community and solidarity for the Church, we need to seek those things first within and among ourselves as brothers.

I have a great devotion to Charles Borromeo because he is very much a saint for our time. Like St. Toribio of Lima, he was a force for authentic reform in an era of tremendous change. We need to be the same. You will recall that the printing press changed the nature of our discourse about God 500 years ago and became the engine of the Protestant Reformation. That was the terrain of Charles Borromeo's life.

In exactly the same way, the new information revolution will fundamentally affect our language of faith and truth. These new media tools are the building blocks of a new global mentality and culture. They are a new way of knowing and expressing things, which we misunderstand at our peril. They are also creating new issues of justice—the information "haves" and "have nots"—which the Church urgently needs to speak to.

This is the terrain of our lives as bishops. Today, we have an opportunity to serve as witnesses of Jesus Christ in the midst of this "new reformation." That is the test of this millennial moment for all of us here. That is the fabric of the New Evangelization.

Jesus Christ alone is the way to eternal life. Let us never be ashamed of His name, or apologize for the message we preach and teach, because it is true for all persons in all times. We should shout that out, not leave it to others in sects which are not blessed with the full truth we find in our Catholic faith.

Generations ago, my own family among the Native people of North America, the Prairie Band Potawatomi Indians, heard the Word of God from priests just like you and me. They understood the freedom of Jesus Christ, and they joyfully embraced the message of salvation those priests proclaimed. For my family, for me, and for hundreds of millions of other souls—across time and throughout our hemisphere; from every tribe and origin—the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been a gift beyond price.

Brothers, as bishops, our task is to share that gift with others, to preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching" (2 Tm, 4:2). As Paul told Timothy, we must "do the work of the evangelist." We are evangelizers first. That is our paramount purpose.

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