

Archbishop Wuerl's Lecture

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Corso Auditorium
The Pontifical North American College
Annual Carl J. Peter Lecture

“Preaching the Word of God”

by

Most Reverend Donald W. Wuerl, S.T.D.

Archbishop of Washington

Thank you, Father Quigley, for your kind introduction, and Monsignor Checchio, for your gracious invitation to participate in the 150th Anniversary celebration and to provide these reflections as a part of the Carl J. Peter Lecture Series.

I also want to greet all of the alumni here present, brother priests, as well as the faculty and students of the North American College, together with so many distinguished guests.

Visitors to the North American College such as the alumni for this reunion and all of the students have the opportunity when walking around the Rappresentanza Level to see the photos that line the walls. They tell a story of the ties between this seminary and the Vicar of Christ. The pictures taken during their visits to this house of priestly formation include Popes Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II. Each pontiff, in his own terms, spoke of the bonds between the North American College and the Successor to Peter — bonds of faith, solidarity, communion and love.

As we know, the beginnings of the College are traced to Pope Pius IX in 1859 who with each of his successors has highlighted the unique mission of the College and prayed for its success.

There is another wall with scenes that also speak of the purpose and focus of this seminary. Framing what was once the principal altar and still is the tabernacle in the main chapel of the college are other themes — these in the

form of bas reliefs in stone. They tell the story of the unique ministerial tasks of the ordained priest. Each of the eight vignettes depicts one of the sacraments as well as the ministry of preaching/teaching.

These two collections of images tell us the purpose of this college. It came to be, a century and a half ago, to provide the Church in the United States a place in Rome where future priests, ministers of the sacred mysteries and teachers of the Word, could be prepared for ordination. Such formation would take place as the future priests would develop a deeper understanding and lived experience of the mission and person of the Vicar of Christ.

This dual mission of formation and communion takes on particular significance for this North American College Community. Carved in stone over the entrance to the college that leads from the Viale dei Pini into the Red Room are the words that remind us of why this venerable institution was first established:

“Young men who have come to this place from the distant shores of America, keep their gaze upon the Vatican hill, strengthen their faith and their love for the Roman Pontiff.”

Greeting those who come to the college as if to confirm those words is the statue of Peter with his symbol of his office, the keys to the kingdom.

The inscription and statue tell us of the special dimension of priestly formation in this college. We have to go to the registry volume that marks the important moments in the life of each student at NAC to find the goal of this very special formation. In the registry there is inscribed, at the conclusion of his stay, the poignant notation for each new priest, “reversus est in patriam ad praedicandum evangelium” — “and he returned to his native land to preach the Gospel.”

This statement is both a declaration of what each alumnus has achieved during our NAC years and an explanation of why we did so. The goal, proclaimed in stone, in photos and verified in sacred ordination and in the “sending” is to provide the Church in our land with priests prepared to preach the Gospel and to do so with a heart that beats in loving accord with Peter.

A number of years ago during an ad limina visit in the course of a lunch hosted by Saint John Paul II, one of the bishops lamented the difficult situation we bishops encounter in passing on the faith in the face of great apathy, indifference and the powerful force of secularism. He asked of the Holy Father, “What can we do?”

The Pope, acknowledging the description of the culture offered by the bishop, reminded all of us at table that we are all called to proclaim the Gospel and then, even in the face of apathy, indifference or rejection, to repeat it and repeat it and repeat it.

The Holy Father went on to point out that while the Gospel message is the same wherever it is proclaimed, it must be announced precisely where we are, in the context of the specific circumstances of our day and the conditions of our own local culture.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has taken to heart this serious obligation and has produced the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* in an effort to both explain and inculturate the teaching of the universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church* into the Church in our country.

In these reflections, I want to touch on the great priestly calling — to preach the Word of God.

To reflect on our role as servants of the Word and heralds of the Truth seems particularly appropriate during this Year for Priests, invoked by our Holy Father to highlight and revitalize our priestly ministry, and in the wake of the Synod on the Word of God during which bishops from all around the world considered this most pressing topic — the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.

There is perhaps no better way to express our gratitude to our alma mater, the North American College, on its 150th anniversary, than by renewing our own personal resolve in the very place where we first prepared, or are preparing, to preach faithfully and fruitfully the Gospel.

Preaching in the Church

In understanding what it is we proclaim, the recent Synod of Bishops called us to reflect on the meaning of the Word of God. It also reminded us that the term itself, “Word of God,” is used analogously. The Synod began its reflection on the Word of God as the Logos, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, so powerfully emphasized in the dramatic Prologue of Saint John’s Gospel. This Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. God became man so that the ineffable, transcendent Word might become visible and a part of our world. His proclamation and teaching, his “words” are derivatively also the “Word of God”, as Saint Peter confessed to Jesus: “You have the words of everlasting life.”

Nevertheless it remains the task of the Church both to interpret the Holy Scriptures authoritatively through the Magisterium, and to respond to the particular needs and opportunities of each age. We are to proclaim the word of

God, in the words of the ancient proverb, *non novo sed nove* – “not new things, but in a new way” – so that the message of the Scriptures can be passed on faithfully and fruitfully to each generation.

The authenticity of our message is rooted not in our learning, our wisdom, or our experience; the assurance that we are teaching the full Gospel message is rooted in our vocation within the Church. None of us preaches as a free agent; we are part of a larger and supernatural reality, the apostolic college in union with Peter and its continuity through space and time, the college of bishops in union with the Pope and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Priests, as participants in the great apostolic tradition, are a part of God’s plan that his Word would speak to the issues of our day. Hence, all the more significant is our communion with Peter and the apostolic college as we apply the Gospel to the circumstances of our day – 2010.

We can name more than a few issues: embryonic stem cell research; abortion; same-sex marriage; in vitro fertilization; health care access; capital punishment; frozen embryo adoption; environment protection; human trafficking; freedom of conscience; protection of religious liberty; pre-marital cohabitation, and the list can go on.

Not to mention other topics such as: the nature of the Petrine office; the uniqueness of Christ’s salvific role; the mediatorship of the Church, and the transforming power of the sacraments.

Our proclamation, teaching and catechesis are intended to be an invitation into a spiritual communion that transcends our particular appreciation of it. We are challenged to recognize our spiritual unity so that we might become what we have the power to be – one family embracing all people of all colors, ethnic backgrounds and national origins united in the truth that is Jesus Christ and in the gift of his Holy Spirit.

The words that our Holy Father used in his address to teachers and educators of the faith at The Catholic University of America on Thursday, April 17, 2008 apply with equal force to us: “How beautiful are the footsteps of those who bring good news (Rom 10:15-17). ... The dynamic between personal encounter, knowledge and Christian witness is integral to the *diakonia* of truth which the Church exercises in the midst of humanity. God’s revelation offers every generation the opportunity to discover the ultimate truth about its own life and the goal of history.”

We cannot enter the mystery of new life and participate in the experience of the kingdom if we have not heard the message and accepted the Word of God.

We are still a long way from the realization of our communion in its fullness. But the Church is its beginning and we should be prepared to see in what the Church teaches, in her sacramental life and in her call to unity, the far deeper reality that will develop and mature into a universal oneness before God.

Today's formation program also calls upon the seminarian to develop those human virtues that support a priestly style of life. In his letter on the Year for Priests, Pope Benedict XVI writes: "In today's world, as in the troubled times of the Curé of Ars, the lives and activity of priests need to be distinguished by a forceful witness to the Gospel. As Pope Paul VI rightly noted, 'modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.'"

In developing these thoughts, I would like to reflect with you on three considerations:

- 1) our communion with and in the Church;
- 2) the primacy of our prophetic/teaching ministry, and
- 3) the context and content of our proclamation.

In all of this we will see some of the characteristics of the priest, proclaimer of the Word, witness to the truth.

Communion

Communion with the Church is neither ambiguous nor amorphous. The Church that Jesus founded, the Body of Christ, the people of God, is structured, visible and identifiable. Concrete solidarity with our bishop, and with the entire body of teaching authenticated by the bishops together our Holy Father, demonstrates our communion with the Church. One cannot be truly Catholic, much less a preacher of the faith, apart from this bond of personal and doctrinal unity. Jesus describes himself as the way, the truth and the life. "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." (Jn 18:37)

His Word, Gospel, Truth creates a community of disciples who are transformed by the power of the Spirit. Acceptance of Christ's word sets us free from the bonds and boundaries of this limited, finite world. We now see with the eyes of faith and see so much more. "The one who has hope," Pope Benedict XVI tells us, "lives differently."

In the recent discussions on the relationships between bishops and Catholic institutions, it is of note that institutions that are recognized as Catholic and then exercise their ministry and activity as a part of the Church are not independent from Church leadership —the bishops. As members of the Catholic community, they must live and act within the structure of that community. That means working in solidarity with the bishops who, as the successors of the apostles, are given the responsibility for preserving the unity of the Church and providing leadership as well as teaching and sanctifying.

This allegiance includes acceptance of the necessary prudential judgments of the bishop required to sustain a unity of faith and practice.

A characteristic of the servant of the Word is his fidelity to it as received in and through the Church. The good and faithful servant pledges his allegiance to the teaching and the teacher.

Pope Benedict XVI in his April 16, 2008 address to the bishops of the United States reminded us that there are real barriers to the mission of making all things new in Christ, our hope. These include secularism, materialism and an emphasis on individualism. It is individualism that directly challenges our sense of ecclesial communion. The Pope went on to tell us that if our emphasis on unity as members of a redeemed community seems countercultural, that is simply further evidence of the urgent need for a renewed evangelization of culture.

Our profession of faith is more than an acceptance of articles of the creed. It is a statement of our engagement in a whole new way of life — of citizenship in a spiritual kingdom — of participation in a communion that is being realized here and now.

The Teaching Ministry

Here I want to touch on our second point, the primacy of our teaching ministry.

Proclaiming the faith is not one more parish program; in a sense, it *is* the parish program. When we hear the claim that many Catholics do not accept the Church's teaching — whether on abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, marriage, sexuality, societal care for the poor, or other moral issues — we need continually to remind ourselves that there is a clearly articulated body of Catholic teaching.

The roof of this college boasts one of, if not, the best views of Rome and Saint Peter's Basilica. Many an hour we have all spent on that terrace walkway and veranda. But with the eyes of faith we also see much more.

The view from the Gianicolo over the past decades has witnessed extraordinary leaders of the faith, each an example of priestly prophetic ministry for the people of that particular day. In the lifetime of many in this auditorium, we witnessed the universal pastoral ministry of popes and examples of their exercise of the teaching office:

Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis, Mediator Dei*

John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris, Mater et Magister*

Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* and *Humanae Vitae*

John Paul II, *Redemptoris hominis, Veritatis Splendor*

Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est, Spe salvi.*

In this constant proclamation, clarification and exhortation of the faith and its application to the circumstances of our day, we see the teaching ministry of the priest writ large.

It is not surprising, then, that the Second Vatican Council stated so boldly that the “first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops [is] to teach the Gospel of God to all...” (PO 4). Without diminishing the threefold priestly task to sanctify, to lead, and to teach, different times do elicit different emphases within our priestly vocation. Given the urgent need for a catechetical renewal today, at least in our part of the world, there is a particular call for us to focus on our prophetic ministry, calling our people to faith in God, to life in his name, and to a kingdom yet to come in its fullness.

Another characteristic of the priest, herald of the faith, is his clarity. He is to speak the truth always in love, but also always with lucidity. We are to be light for the children of light.

Context Today

Since both the decline in participation in the sacramental life of the Church and faltering allegiance to Church leadership are both directly connected to the diminished appropriation of the faith resulting from widespread and recognized catechetical deficiencies of the past, it can be reasonable assumed that if we address effectively the teaching of the faith, the other concerns will be simultaneously met.

As we face the challenge of our secular culture and the effects of the diminished catechesis of past decades, we must have great confidence in both our call and our message. Jesus did not hesitate to identify himself with his Church. To the

disciples, as he sent them to preach in his name, he said: “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me” (Lk 10:16). Of Saint Paul, who had been vigorously persecuting the Church before his own conversion, Christ asked: “Why do you persecute me? ...I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:4-5). At the Last Supper he spoke of the intense unity that makes him one with those who are united by faith and love to him: “I am the vine, you are the branches” (Jn 15:5). The vine and branches are one living reality. So it is also with Christ and his Church.

Another characteristic of the priest, witness of the truth, is his confidence. It is not ourselves we preach but Christ Jesus. We can be fully assured and therefore serene. As Saint John Paul II reminded us: “You know the Gospel; repeat it, repeat it and then repeat it again.”

At the installation of every pastor, which I have tried to do in each instance in my 24 years as a bishop, I find the ceremony itself a great opportunity for renewal of the understanding of priestly ministry for all involved. In the context of this ritual, the priest is asked to reaffirm his commitment to proclaim faithfully the received tradition of the Church.

“Reversus in patriam ad praedicandum evangelium.” The alumni of NAC do so fully aware that the profession of faith and promise of fidelity to the Church’s teaching is not made in abstraction but in living continuity with Peter who walks with us today and The Twelve in their successors. It is Peter and The Twelve who invite every priest into vibrant participation in that action that defines the Church as apostolic.

At the same time, as a good shepherd the priest can neither guide in the ways of the truth — his prophetic ministry — nor heal what has been broken — his pastoral ministry — by isolating or separating these two dimensions of the same rich, Christ-like ministry. From the pulpit the priest must proclaim the truth — the complete and unvarnished truth — that is the way to salvation. As confessor, counselor and spiritual guide, the priest meets the members of his flock where they are to support and walk with them on their pilgrimage to the Father. Uniting clarity and compassion, as Jesus did, is an essential component of preaching the Word of God in every generation, but more than ever in our own time when so many have drifted so far from God.

The faithful who sit in the pews around us at Sunday Mass have not all had the advantage of continuous religious instruction as they grew up and developed intellectually and spiritually. They may have had only sporadic, superficial instruction in the faith, leaving them with little foundation for addressing the issues of life, including its purpose for themselves and their children. For them,

we need to be clear but loving shepherds. As the installation ritual points out, the pastor must always be a “loving father, a gentle shepherd, and a wise teacher” of his people, so that he can “lead them to Christ.”

Content of Preaching

There are many ways and opportunities for a priest to carry out the mission to teach the faith. Since teaching is at the very heart of the Church and the priest’s vocation, we have a direct responsibility to oversee Catholic instruction — whether in parish schools, parish religious education programs, adult faith formation, RCIA, sacramental formation programs, and the many forms of youth ministry, campus ministry and evangelizing outreach.

Beyond these more formal occasions to teach the faith, every priest finds other times and ways to speak of Christ, to speak for Christ. This can happen in a hospital room, a funeral home, a family table. We are regularly asked to speak at events — parish, local, regional and sometimes national. Each one of these can be an opportunity to teach the faith. It should never be an opportunity lost.

There is almost no end to possibilities for teaching if we set our minds to it. Parish newsletters, web pages, pamphlets or CD’s at the back of church — even bulletins can be effective teaching instruments. I see many parish bulletins with a “pastor’s corner” in which some teaching of the Church is highlighted effectively. Given the number of bulletins that are prepared and passed out every week, it seems a lost opportunity if the content is confined to the dates and places of various parish events, as important as they are.

The Sunday Homily: A Privileged Moment

Among all the occasions we have to proclaim the word of God, however, none has as privileged a place as the Sunday homily. It is from the pulpit that Sunday after Sunday we have an opportunity directly to touch our people in a way that nothing else we do can. I once read a statistic that on any Sunday throughout our land there are more people in churches listening to their priest or minister than there are attending all of the major sports events in the course of a year. Every priest has hundreds or even thousands of hearers each Sunday. We must not squander this opportunity.

The Synod on the Word of God affirmed that it is precisely in the Liturgy, which is both an act of worship and a pedagogue, that the vast majority of practicing Catholics come into contact with the life-giving encounter with Christ. The Synod specifically identified the homily as an appropriate vehicle for conveying the faith, to help people penetrate the riches of Sacred Scripture with pure doctrine and catechesis.

The topic of thematic homilies was explored also on the Synod on the Eucharist which resulted in the post synodal exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*. Here we read: “The catechetical and paraenetic aim of the homily should not be forgotten. During the course of the liturgical year it is appropriate to offer the faithful, prudently and on the basis of the three-year lectionary, ‘thematic’ homilies treating the great themes of the Christian faith, on the basis of what has been authoritatively proposed by the Magisterium in the four ‘pillars’ of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the recent *Compendium*, namely: the profession of faith, the celebration of the Christian mystery, life in Christ and Christian prayer.”

The parish priest can easily use the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, especially with its Scriptural index, or the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, coupled with the Lectionary and his daily experience to mold a homily that touches both mind and heart. At the same time, he helps make up what is lacking in the embrace and appropriation of the faith by so many today.

Another homiletic resource which each of us already has is his personal experience. Every good preacher, each of you here this morning, develops a “homiletic sense,” a certain instinct that we hone over the years to keep our eyes and ears open for homiletic material, such as events that befall us, stories we read, quotable lines, insights that we have.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to share a thought from an early Father of the Church. 1,600 years ago, Saint Paulinus of Nola wrote an encouragement to a brother in ministry. His words are reflective of the efforts of every NAC alumnus, “Per te barbari discunt resonare Christum corde Romano” (“Through you the unchurched will learn to echo Christ with a Roman heart”). Those same words speak to our love for this college and how it has motivated, guided and enabled us to do just what that fourth century bishop and doctor of the Church urged: “To echo Christ — with a Roman heart.”

What better tribute is there in this Year for Priests than to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the founding of the North American College. We recognize that the joy of those thousands of priests, like ourselves, who prepared here over so many years and the glory of our college, are found in the realization that all were formed at the center of the Church in the love of Jesus Christ and in his Word.

They — we — were initiated into the wisdom of Jesus’ Gospel, in communion with his vicar, our Holy Father.

Thus we could, and did, in the words of the college register, “reversus est in patrium”— return to our beloved United States of America “ad praedicandum evangelium,” to announce a simple yet sublime message that we echo with Peter, Linus, Cletus, Clement, Pius, John, Paul, John Paul and Benedict.

Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.