

NORTHWEST CATHOLIC MEN'S CONFERENCE  
Pendleton, Oregon  
25 February 2011

**PRESENTATION:  
WITNESSES TO CHRIST, MARTYRS FOR THE FAITH**

**Introduction**

First of all, I wish to thank Bishop Robert Vasa and Father Bailey Clemens, Pastor of Saint Mary's Parish in Pendleton, for the invitation to speak to you, Catholic men of the Northwest, gathered in faith to celebrate the third annual Northwest Catholic Men's Conference. It is my hope to be a help and encouragement to you in living your Catholic faith with new engagement and new energy.

The culture in which we live is not easy for Catholic men. It calls into question the most basic truths about God, about us and about our world. In a particular way, by its open disregard and even hostility toward the moral law, written by God in every human heart, it presents a most difficult challenge for men. A godless culture necessarily calls into question the very notion of the distinct nature of man and of his vocation of fatherhood. As the Catholic psychologist Paul Vitz once observed, atheism is the religion of the fatherless.

At the same time, the state of our culture points to the critical importance of men recovering the understanding of their distinct gifts and their distinct vocation of fatherhood for the transformation of our culture from a culture of godlessness and death to a culture of faith and life. I commend you for all that you are doing to deepen your understanding of your life and vocation as men, and to fortify yourselves to live your manhood with integrity and, thereby, to be agents of the transformation of our homes and of society, in general.

In my presentation tonight, I want to reflect with you on our Christian vocation to be witnesses to Christ and, therefore, martyrs for the faith. First, I will set the context of the living of our Christian vocation in the present time, as presented to us by Pope Benedict XVI who urges us to study again the teaching of His saintly predecessor, the Venerable, soon to be Blessed, Pope John Paul II. Then, I will present briefly the teaching of Pope John Paul II on the new evangelization as witness to Christ. The third part of my presentation is a reflection on witness as martyrdom and the various forms which it takes. The final part of my presentation concerns conscience as the voice of God enlightening and guiding us on the way

of witness and martyrdom.

### **The Context of Living Our Christian Vocation**

Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2010 Christmas address to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate of Vatican City State, spoke clearly and strongly about the profoundly disordered moral state in which our world finds itself, today. He spoke about the grave evils of our time, for example, the sexual abuse of minors by the clergy, the marketing of child pornography, sexual tourism, and the deadly abuse of drugs. One also thinks, for instance, of the plague of procured abortion in our society, which justifies the wholesale murder of the unborn in the womb as the exercise of the so-called right of the mother to choose whether to bring to term the baby she has conceived; of the artificial generation of human life and its destruction, at the embryonic stage of development, which are justified as the means to find supposed cures for crippling or deadly diseases; and of the so-called “mercy killing” of those who have the first title to our care, our brothers and sisters who have grown weak through advanced years, grave illness or special needs, which is justified as respect for the quality of their lives. One thinks, too, of the ever advancing agenda of those who want to redefine marriage to include the unnatural sexual union of two persons of the same sex, which is justified as tolerance of so-called alternative forms of human sexuality, as if there were a true form of human sexuality other than that intended by God, our Creator and Redeemer.

Regarding the grave evils which beset the world, in our day, Pope Benedict XVI declared that they are all signs of “the tyranny of mammon which perverts mankind” and that they result from “a fatal misunderstanding of freedom which actually undermines man’s freedom and ultimately destroys it.”<sup>1</sup> They are manifestations, to be sure, of a way of living, to use the words of the Venerable, soon to be Blessed, Pope John Paul II, “as if God did not exist.”<sup>2</sup> They are a manifestation of sin at its root, pride, the pride of man who fails to recognize that all that he is and has comes from the hand of God Who has created us and has redeemed us, after the sin of our First Parents. They are a manifestation of the foolishness of

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Benedict XVI’s Christmas greeting to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate: Resolved in faith and in doing good,” *L’Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English*, 22-29 December 2010, p. 13.

seeking our freedom other than in the will of God and thus making ourselves slaves to creaturely realities. That foolishness manifests itself in a most distressing way in a culture of addictions, in which we seek our freedom and happiness in some creaturely reality and when we do not find them there, as indeed we never can, we, in our pride, instead of turning in obedience to God, enslave ourselves more and more to the same creature, for example, alcohol, food, sexual promiscuity or pornography, until the creature destroys us.

Pope Benedict XVI's words in his Christmas address of last year are redolent of the powerful pastoral concern which he expressed in his homily during the Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff, celebrated before the conclave during which he was elected to the See of Peter. He spoke of how the "the thought of many Christians" has been tossed about, in our time, by various "ideological currents," observing that we are witnesses to the "human deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error," about which Saint Paul wrote in his *Letter to the Ephesians*.<sup>3</sup> He noted that, in our time, those who live according to "a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church" are viewed as extremists, while relativism, that is, "letting oneself be 'tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine'," is extolled.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the source of the grave moral evils of our time, he concluded: "We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires."<sup>5</sup>

In his 2010 Christmas address, reflecting on the grave evils which are destroying us as individuals and as a society, and which have generated a culture marked predominantly by violence and death, the Holy Father reminded us that, if we, with the help of God's grace, are to overcome the grave evils of our time, "we must turn our attention to their ideological foundations."<sup>6</sup> He then identified directly and unequivocally the ideology which fosters these evils: a perversion of *ethos*, the moral norm, which has even entered into the thinking of some theologians in the Church.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, "On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World," 30 December 1988, Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988, no. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff: Monday, 18 April: Homily by the Cardinal who became Pope," *L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English*, 20 April 2005, p. 3. Cf. *Eph* 4:14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Benedict XVI's Christmas greeting to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate," p. 52.

Referring to one of the more shocking manifestations of the ideology, namely, the so-called moral position that the sexual abuse of children by adults is actually good for the children and for the adults, he declared:

It was maintained – even within the realm of Catholic theology – that there is no such thing as evil in itself or good in itself. There is only a “better than” and a “worse than”. Nothing is good or bad in itself. Everything depends on the circumstances and on the end in view. Anything can be good or also bad, depending upon purposes and circumstances. Morality is replaced by a calculus of consequences, and in the process it ceases to exist.<sup>7</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI describes a moral relativism, called proportionalism or consequentialism in contemporary moral theology, which has generated profound confusion and outright error regarding the most fundamental truths of the moral law.<sup>8</sup> It has led to a situation in which morality itself indeed “ceases to exist.” If, therefore, the irreplaceable moral order, which is the way of our freedom and happiness, is to be restored we must address with clarity and steadfastness the error of moral relativism, proportionalism and consequentialism, which permeates our culture and has also entered, as the Holy Father reminds us, into the Church.

To confront the ideology, Pope Benedict XVI has urged us to study anew the teaching of his predecessor, the Venerable, soon to be Blessed, Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, “On the Fundamentals of the Church’s Moral Teaching.” In *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “indicated with prophetic force, in the great rational tradition of Christian *ethos*, the essential and permanent foundations of moral action.”<sup>9</sup> Reminding us of the need to form our consciences, in accord with the moral teaching of the Church, our Holy Father also reminded us of “our responsibility to make these criteria [these moral foundations] audible and intelligible once more for people today as paths of true humanity, in the context of our paramount concern for mankind.”<sup>10</sup> In the exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI, we see the expression of the deepest pastoral charity of the Vicar of Christ on earth, charity, which like that of the Christ the Good Shepherd, knows no boundary and is unceasing.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, “On the Fundamentals of the Church’s Moral Teaching,” 6 August 1993, Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, no. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Benedict XVI’s Christmas greeting to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate,” p. 13.

In the end, we discover the truth, the true concept of *ethos*, of the moral norm, in Jesus Christ, in a personal relationship with Him as He comes to meet us and to make us ever more one with Him in His Mystical Body, the Church. In Jesus Christ, God the Son made man, heaven has come to earth to dispel the darkness of error and sin, and to fill our souls with the light of truth and goodness. If we live in Christ, in the union of our hearts with His Most Sacred Heart, when our brothers and sisters who are lost in the unreal world of moral relativism and are, therefore, tempted to despair encounter us, they find direction for their lives and the hope for which they are looking and longing. Living in Jesus Christ, living according to the truth which He alone teaches us in His Church, we become light to dispel the confusion and error which lead to the many and so grave moral evils of our time, and to inspire a life lived in accord with the truth and, therefore, marked by freedom and happiness.

### **The Venerable Pope John Paul II and the New Evangelization**

Addressing the challenge of Christian living in a totally secularized world, the Venerable Pope John Paul II called us to the new evangelization, to teaching the faith, celebrating the faith in the Sacraments and prayer, and living the faith, as if for the first time, that is, with the engagement and energy of the first disciples, of the first apostles to our native place. Before the grave situation of the world today, we are, he reminds us, like the first disciples who, after hearing Saint Peter's Pentecost discourse, asked him: "What must we do?"<sup>11</sup> Even as the first disciples faced a pagan world which had not even heard of our Lord Jesus Christ, so, we, too face a culture which is forgetful of God and hostile to His Law written upon every human heart.

Before the great challenge of our time, Pope John Paul cautioned us that we will not save ourselves and our world by discovering "some magic formula" or by "inventing a new programme."<sup>12</sup> He declared to us:

No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: *I am with you.*<sup>13</sup>

He reminded us that the programme by which we are to address effectively the great spiritual

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Acts* 2:37.

<sup>12</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, "At the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000," 6 January 2001, Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001, no. 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

challenges of our time is, in the end, Jesus Christ alive for us in the Church. He explained:

The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its center in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a program which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication.<sup>14</sup>

In short, the program leading to freedom and happiness is, for each of us, holiness of life.

The Venerable Pope John Paul II, in fact, cast the entire pastoral plan for the Church in terms of holiness. He explained himself thus:

In fact, to place pastoral planning under the heading of holiness is a choice filled with consequences. It implies the conviction that, since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethics and a shallow religiosity. To ask catechumens: “Do you wish to be receive Baptism?” means at the same time to ask them: “Do you wish to become holy?” It means to set before them the radical nature of the Sermon on the Mount: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (*Mt 5:48*).<sup>15</sup>

Pope John Paul II continued, making reference to the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, reminding us that “this ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few ‘uncommon heroes’ of holiness.”<sup>16</sup>

Pope John Paul II taught us the extraordinary nature of our ordinary life, because it is lived in Christ and, therefore, produces in us the incomparable beauty of holiness. He declared:

The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual. I thank the Lord that in these years he has enabled me to beatify and canonize a large number of Christians, and among them many lay people who attained

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

holiness in the most ordinary circumstances of life. The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction.<sup>17</sup>

Seeing in us the daily conversion of life by which we strive to meet the high standard of holiness, our brothers and sisters will discover the great mystery of their own ordinary life in which God daily showers upon them his ceaseless and immeasurable love.

Making pilgrimage to the ancient shrine of Saint James the Greater at Compostela in Spain, in November of last year, Pope Benedict XVI urged Europeans to recognize the great gift of God's love in the world, in Jesus Christ, and to follow Him in holiness of life. His words to the faithful of Europe, who have grown so forgetful of God and even hostile to His Law, apply also to us in America. The very end of a pilgrimage is to open our eyes to the great mystery of God's love in our lives, that is, to open our eyes to see the extraordinary nature of ordinary living. Let us listen to the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

God is the origin of our being and the foundation and apex of our freedom, not its opponent. How can mortal man build a firm foundation and how can the sinner be reconciled with himself? How can it be that there is public silence with regard to the first and essential reality of human life? How can what is most decisive in life be confined to the purely private sphere or banished to the shadows? We cannot live in darkness, without seeing the light of the sun. How is it then that God, who is the light of every mind, the power of every will and the magnet of every heart, be denied the right to propose the light that dissipates all darkness? This is why we need to hear God once again under the skies of Europe; may this holy word not be spoken in vain, and may it not be put at the service of purposes other than its own. It needs to be spoken in a holy way. And we must hear it in this way in ordinary life, in the silence of work, in brotherly love and in the difficulties that the years bring on.<sup>18</sup>

The words of our Holy Father make clear the inherent dynamism of the life of the Holy Spirit within us, leading us to give witness to mystery of God's love in our lives and so to convert

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Compostelian Jubilee Year Mass at Santiago de Compostela: God resounds anew under the skies of Europe," *L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English*, 10 November 2010, pp. 5 and 8.

our own lives more fully to Christ and to transform our world.

### **Christian Living as Martyrdom for the Faith**

Such witness is martyrdom. In the words of the Holy Scriptures, it is dying to self, in order to live for Christ.<sup>19</sup> It is what the Servant of God Father John A. Hardon, S.J., called “the palpable fact of every true follower of Christ.”<sup>20</sup> When we hear the word, martyrdom, we tend to think exclusively of those who have given their lifeblood out of faithful love of Christ, who have been killed because of hatred of Christ and the faith. Red martyrs or martyrs of blood give the highest form of witness and are our models in giving daily witness to our love of Christ, even though we may not be asked to pour out our lifeblood. Through their martyrdom, they also win for us so many graces for our daily living. In the words of the Servant of God Father Hardon, “[t]hrough their sufferings we are all made richer, as through their merits the whole Church becomes more holy.”<sup>21</sup>

Saint Thomas More, husband and father, and high-ranking member of the government of King Henry VIII, was a martyr for the faith in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the face of imprisonment and execution, he steadfastly listened to the voice of God, rather the voices of men who insisted that he act according to a human way of thinking, alienated from the wisdom of God, from the moral law. At his trial on July 1, 1535, Saint Thomas More held firmly to the living Tradition of the Church, which forbade him, in conscience, to acknowledge King Henry VIII with the title of Supreme Head of the Church. When, during the trial, the Chancellor rebuked him, citing the acceptance of the title by so many bishops and nobles of the land, Thomas More replied: “My lord, for one bishop of your opinion I have a hundred saints of mine; and for one parliament of yours, and God knows of what kind, I have all the General Councils for 1,000 years, ....”<sup>22</sup>

When the Duke of Norfolk accused him of malice in his response, Thomas More replied: “What I say is necessary for discharge of my conscience and satisfaction of my soul, and to this I call God to witness, the sole Searcher of human hearts.”<sup>23</sup> Thomas More was condemned to death. The reason for his death sentence was hatred of the Catholic faith and,

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. *2 Cor* 5:15; and *1 Pet* 2:24.

<sup>20</sup> John A. Hardon, S.J., *Holiness in the Church*, Bardstown: Eternal Life, 2000, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith, eds. *A Thomas More Source Book*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004, p. 354.

specifically, of its teaching on the primacy of Saint Peter as the Vicar of Christ on earth. Rightly, Thomas More declared on the scaffold, as he was about to be beheaded: “I die the king’s good servant, and God’s first.”<sup>24</sup> The Saint served his king well by obeying God Who revealed His truth to him through Thomas More’s conscience, instructed and informed by the example of the saints of the Church and by her Magisterium. So, too, we only serve well our brothers and sisters, when we first serve God with fidelity and without compromise, following His voice, our conscience.

During his pastoral visit to the United Kingdom in September of last year, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on the questions which Saint Thomas More, Martyr, continues to raise to us who are one with him in the Church, Militant, Suffering and Glorious. He explained:

And yet the fundamental questions at stake in Thomas More’s trial continue to present themselves in ever-changing terms as new social conditions emerge. Each generation, as it seeks to advance the common good, must ask anew: what are the requirements that governments may reasonably impose upon citizens, and how far do they extend? By appeal to what authority can moral dilemmas be resolved? These questions take us directly to the ethical foundations of civil discourse. If the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident – herein lies the real challenge for democracy.<sup>25</sup>

Surely, we face, in our time and in our nation, a similar challenge to our faith as did Saint Thomas More. In the face of the ever advancing anti-life and anti-family agenda of those who are in power, we pray, through the intercession of Saint Thomas More, that we may be faithful and courageous in loving Christ in every brother and sister, especially those in most need, those whom our Lord called “the least” of His brethren.”<sup>26</sup>

There is also the martyrdom of persecution. Father Hardon explains:

Not all the faithful who suffer for Christ also die for Christ. Opposition to the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>25</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Heart Speaks Unto Heart: Pope Benedict XVI in the UK: The Complete Addresses and Homilies*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2010, p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Mt* 25:40 and 45.

Christian faith and way of life does not always end in violent death for the persecuted victims. Consequently it is well to distinguish between what may be called martyrdom of blood and martyrdom of opposition which is bloodless indeed but no less – and sometimes more – painful to endure.<sup>27</sup>

We think, for example, of the persecution of our brothers and sisters in China or in some Islamic societies. While they seem to be free, in the sense that they are not imprisoned, “they are, in effect, deprived of every human liberty to practice their religion and to serve Christ according to their faith.”<sup>28</sup>

If we reflect, with some depth, on the martyrdom of opposition, we recognize in our nation and in some of its policies and laws an opposition to the Christian’s adherence to the natural moral law. Think, for instance, of the pharmacist who is compelled by the courts to fill prescriptions for abortifacient drugs, or the priest who is charged with the use of so-called “hate language” because he teaches the truth about the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts. Not without reason, there is greater and greater fear that the Church will be unable to carry out her educational, health-care and charitable works because the civil law requires that such works cooperate in acts which are always and every wrong.

The Servant of God Father Hardon cites a passage from the *Book of Wisdom*, regarding how the godless persecute the virtuous who are “a standing rebuke to them.”<sup>29</sup> The passage presents the way of thinking of those who oppose the way of faith, with these words:

Let us oppress the righteous poor man; let us not spare the widow, nor regard the gray hairs of the aged. But let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless. Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange.<sup>30</sup>

When our upholding of the moral law, as we must uphold it, brings forth resistance, we must recall that we, alive in Christ, are a sign of contradiction to the world’s way of thinking. Our

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<sup>27</sup> John A. Hardon, S.J., *Holiness in the Church*, p. 33.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

lives are a rebuke of the violation of the moral law, not for the sake of rebuking, but for the sake of the salvation of our world.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, there is the martyrdom of witness, the most common form of martyrdom, the martyrdom which is inherent to the Christian life. It can take the form of suffering personal hostility or simply indifference in giving the witness of a Christian life. The Servant of God Father Hardon describes the martyrdom of witness with these words:

All that we have seen about the martyrdom by violence applies here too, but the method of opposition is different. Here the firm believer in the Church's teaching authority; the devoted servant of the papacy; the convinced pastor who insists on sound doctrine to his flock; the dedicated religious who want to remain faithful to their vows of authentic poverty, honest chastity and sincere obedience; the firm parents who are concerned about the religious and moral training of their children and are willing to sacrifice generously to build and care for a Christian family – natural or adopted – such persons will not be spared also active criticism and open opposition. But they must especially be ready to live in an atmosphere of coldness to their deepest beliefs.<sup>32</sup>

The hostility and the even more pervasive indifference to the beliefs we hold most dearly tempts us to discouragement and even to avoid the more public witness to our faith. But the martyrdom to which we are called and for which we are consecrated and fortified by the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, requires us to offer tirelessly our witness, confident that God will bring forth the good fruit.

In the introduction of his doctrinal and spiritual manual for catechists, Father John A. Hardon reflected on the urgent need of strong martyrs of witness in our time. He declared:

In 1972 Pope Paul VI said, "Satan's smoke has made its way into the temple of God..." Now, as we enter the third millennium, it is no longer "smoke" but a raging fire. Catholicism is in the throes of the worst crisis in its entire history. Unless true and loyal Catholics have the zeal and the spirit of the early Christians, unless they are willing to do what they did and to pay the price that

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<sup>30</sup> *Wis* 2:10-15.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Lk* 2:34.

<sup>32</sup> John A. Hardon, S.J., *Holiness in the Church*, p. 37.

they paid, the days of America are numbered.<sup>33</sup>

Given the breakdown in family life, the wholesale attack on innocent and defenseless human lives, and the violation of the integrity of the union of marriage in our society, the call to the martyrdom of witness is ever more urgent.

As Father Hardon understood, to a remarkable degree, a fundamental and essential form of witness is dedication to the sound teaching of the faith, the condition of the possibility of the love and service of the faith. For that reason, he devoted the last years of his life and his very last energies to the foundation and development of the Marian Catechist Apostolate for the sound spiritual and doctrinal formation of catechists. Before the great challenges of teaching the Catholic faith in our time, he urged catechists to remember the first disciples, the early Christians, who, with the help of God's grace, faithfully and efficaciously evangelized a pagan world, frequently at the cost of their lifeblood.

In the last century, we have a saintly example of the martyrdom of witness, which led to the martyrdom of persecution and the martyrdom of death in the life of Father Maximilian Maria Kolbe, Conventual Franciscan Friar. Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe, formed by the example of Mary Immaculate and with the help of her intercession, dedicated his religious and priestly life to the use of the media, in his time, principally the media of print, for the teaching of the faith. His tireless insistence on teaching the truths of the faith through the printed media led to his arrest and imprisonment under the Nazi regime. Thus his martyrdom of witness led to his martyrdom of persecution. Finally, in prison, he gave the supreme witness, the martyrdom of blood, offering up his life to save the life of a father of family, who had been condemned to death by starvation as a reprisal for prisoners who had escaped from the concentration camp at Auschwitz, in which both Father Kolbe and he were interned.

In the death cell, in which Father Kolbe, along with others, was confined to undergo the slow and agonizing death by starvation, Father Kolbe continued his martyrdom of witness, while he waited to offer himself as a martyr of blood. He urged his fellow prisoners not to give way to despair and hatred but to follow the maternal counsel and example of Mary Immaculate, seeking in the Sacred Heart of Jesus unfailing hope and unconditional love. He led his fellow prisoners in singing hymns which both expressed and strengthened their hope and love. He seemed indestructible in his love. In the end, the prison guard gave a fatal

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<sup>33</sup> John A. Hardon, S.J., *Marian Catechist Manual*, Bardstown: Eternal Life, 2000, p. xv.

injection to bring down this tireless witness of Christ. Saint Maximilian Kolbe teaches us to remain close to the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom we in America venerate under the title of Our Lady of Guadalupe, who will lead us to the Heart of her Son, in which we find the unfailing inspiration and strength for our martyrdom of witness and martyrdom of persecution, and are prepared, should it be necessary, to give the supreme witness of the martyrdom of blood.

### **Conscience, the Infallible Guide of Martyrs**

If we are to fulfill our call to be martyrs for the faith, namely, to give our lives to Christ, without any reserve, our hearts must seek their wisdom and strength in the glorious pierced Heart of Jesus; our conscience must be trained to listen to God's voice alone and to reject what would weaken or compromise, in any way, our witness. Through our daily prayer and devotion, and through our study of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and of the Papal Magisterium, our conscience is formed according to the will of God, His law which is life for us.

It is the conscience, the voice of God, speaking to our souls, which is, in the words of the Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, "the aboriginal Vicar of Christ."<sup>34</sup> As such, the conscience is ever attuned to Christ Himself Who instructs and informs it through His Vicar, the Roman Pontiff, and the Bishops in communion with the Roman Pontiff. The Blessed Cardinal Newman observed that conscience "is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives."<sup>35</sup>

Today, we must be attentive to a false notion of conscience, which would actually use the conscience to justify sinful acts, the betrayal of our call to martyrdom. In the earlier-mentioned Christmas discourse to the College of Cardinals, Roman Curia and Governorate of the Vatican, Pope Benedict also reflected, at some length, on the notion of conscience in the writings of Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, contrasting it with a false notion of conscience, which is pervasive in our time. He described the difference of the Church's understanding of conscience, as faithfully and brilliantly taught by the Blessed Cardinal Newman:

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<sup>34</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk," V, in *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching II*, London: Longmans Green, 1885, p. 248. Quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1778.

In modern thinking, the word “conscience” signifies that for moral and religious questions, it is the subjective dimension, the individual, that constitutes the final authority for decision. The world is divided into the realms of the objective and the subjective. To the objective realm belong things that can be calculated and verified by experiment. Religion and morals fall outside the scope of these methods and are therefore considered to lie within the subjective realm. Here, it is said, there are in the final analysis no objective criteria. The ultimate instance that can decide here is therefore the subject alone, and precisely this is what the word “conscience” expresses: in this realm only the individual, with his intuitions and experiences, can decide. Newman’s understanding of conscience is diametrically opposed to this. For him, “conscience” means man’s capacity for truth: the capacity to recognize precisely in the decision-making areas of his life – religion and morals – a truth, *the* truth. At the same time, conscience – man’s capacity to recognize truth – thereby imposes on him the obligation to set out along the path towards truth, to seek it and to submit to it wherever he finds it. Conscience is both capacity for truth and obedience to the truth which manifests itself to anyone who seeks it with an open heart.<sup>36</sup>

Conscience, therefore, does not set each of us apart as an arbiter of what is right and good, but unites us in the pursuit of the one truth, ultimately Our Lord Jesus Christ Who is the only arbiter of the right and good, so that our thoughts, words and actions put that truth into practice.

In the same Christmas discourse, Pope Benedict XVI clarified an often misunderstood passage of Blessed Cardinal Newman used in fact to promote the erroneous subjective notion of conscience. Our Holy Father observed:

In support of the claim that Newman’s concept of conscience matched the modern subjective understanding, people often quote a letter in which he said – should he have to propose a toast – that he would drink first to conscience and then to the Pope. But in this statement, “conscience” does not signify the

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Benedict XVI’s Christmas greeting to the College of Cardinals, the Roman Curia and the Governorate,” p. 14.

ultimately binding quality of subjective intuition. It is an expression of the accessibility and the binding force of truth: on this its primacy is based. The second toast can be addressed to the Pope because it is his task to demand obedience to the truth.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, there can never be a contrast between what the conscience demands of us and what the truth of the faith, as enunciated by the Holy Father, demands of us. The conscience, in fact, is drawing us into an ever deeper understanding of the truth and adherence to it in our thoughts, words and actions.

### **Conclusion**

Reflecting, at length, on the call to martyrdom in our time, to faithful and total witness, for the sake of our own salvation and the salvation of the world, we recognize that it is Christ Himself who makes it possible for us to be true martyrs. It is in following Him faithfully and without reserve that we bring the light of truth to our world. At the same time, He is with us always, as He promised, to sustain us by His grace, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Our reflection cannot conclude without underlining those extraordinary means by which Christ comes to us in the Church, accompanies us along our life pilgrimage and sustains us in faithful and total witness, bringing us safely home to the Father. I mean the Sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Penance. In the Holy Eucharist, Christ unites our hearts, as perfectly as is possible in this life, to His Most Sacred Heart. He nourishes the life of the Holy Spirit within us with the incomparable Food which is His true Body and Blood. The Holy Eucharist not only strengthens us spiritually to be true martyrs, but is the model of our martyrdom, pure and selfless love, without condition, “to the end.”<sup>38</sup>

The life of the martyr for the faith finds its center and source in the Eucharistic sacrifice, in Eucharistic adoration, and in all forms of Eucharistic devotion, especially visits to the Blessed Sacrament and Spiritual Communion throughout the day. Through Eucharistic devotion and all true devotion, we extend our communion with the Lord in the Eucharistic Sacrifice into every aspect of our lives at every moment of our lives.

The Sacrament of Penance renews the grace of our baptism and confirmation through

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

a personal encounter with Christ for the confession and forgiveness of our sins. Frequent confession, including confession of devotion, is essential to our growth in the truth which is made known to us through our conscience. Essentially connected to it is our nightly examination of conscience and Act of Contrition, by which day by day, we turn once again to Christ in our heart and prepare ourselves for the sacramental encounter with Him in Confession. The integrity and courage needed to be a martyr of witness in the world today demand the intimacy with Christ, which can only come through the daily examination of conscience and Act of Contrition, and the regular meeting with Him in the Sacrament of Penance.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is both our model and our great intercessor in living the martyrdom of witness, of persecution and of blood. She is one of us, she shares fully our human nature, but, by God's favor, she was preserved from any stain of sin from the moment of her conception. She was from the first moment of her life and remains always totally for Christ. The Venerable Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, reminds us of our Blessed Mother's irreplaceable help to us in giving the witness which is martyrdom:

Mary shares our human condition, but in complete openness to the grace of God. Not having known sin, she is able to have compassion on every kind of weakness. She understands sinful man and loves him with a Mother's love. Precisely for this reason she is on the side of truth and shares the Church's burden in recalling always and to everyone the demands of morality. Nor does she permit sinful man to be deceived by those who claim to love him by justifying his sin, for she knows that the sacrifice of Christ her Son would thus be emptied of its power. No absolution offered by beguiling doctrines, even in the areas of philosophy and theology, can make man truly happy: only the Cross and the glory of the Risen Christ can grant peace to his conscience and salvation to his life.<sup>39</sup>

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, especially under her title of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of America and Star of the New Evangelization, intercede for us that we may be true and faithful witnesses to Christ alive within each of us. And may we turn to her always, so that she may bring us to her Son with her maternal counsel, given to the wine stewards at the

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Jn* 13:1

Wedding Feast of Cana: “Do whatever He tells you.”<sup>40</sup> So may He transform our lives and our world.

Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke  
Archbishop Emeritus of Saint Louis  
Prefect of the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura  
22 February 2011 – Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter

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<sup>39</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 120.

<sup>40</sup> *Jn* 2:5.