

**REFLECTION ON THE OCCASION OF THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
DIOCESE OF DES MOINES, IOWA AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE –
AWAKENING TO CHRIST**

NOVEMBER 6, 2011

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First of all I would like to express my profound gratitude to you Bishop, Richard Pates, for having invited me here this morning to speak at this historic gathering. Bishop Pates and I worked together in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis for some years and I have great admiration for his abilities, his business skills and his priestly generosity and his pastoral sensitivity. Thank you, Bishop Pates.

There is an old Hebrew prayer whose source is unknown which has touched me deeply:

Birth is a beginning
and death a destination
and life a journey:

From childhood and maturity
and youth to age;

From innocence to awareness
and ignorance to knowing;

From foolishness
to discretion and then,
perhaps to wisdom;

From weakness to strength
or strength to weakness – and,
often back again;

From health, to sickness and back,
we pray to health again;

From offense to forgiveness,
from loneliness to love,

From joy to gratitude
from pain to compassion,

And grief to understanding,

from fear to faith;

From defeat to defeat to defeat –
until, looking backward or ahead,

We see that victory lies
not at some high place
along the way,
but in having made a journey
stage by stage

And life a journey and victory
lies in having made the journey
stage by stage

This morning we gather to celebrate 100 years as a diocese and to wonder at and to give thanks for so much that has been accomplished.

For the past 100 years this local Church has created the atmosphere over and over, stage by stage, for women and men to surrender to Jesus Christ. Leaders like:

Bishop Austin Dowling, the first Bishop of Des Moines; Bishop Thomas W. Drumm, Bishop Gerald T. Bergan, Bishop Edward C. Daly, O.P., Bishop George J. Biskup, Bishop Maurice J. Dingman, Bishop William H. Bullock, Bishop Joseph L. Charron, C.P.P.S, and now Bishop Pates, along with dedicated priests and religious women and men and lay women and lay men as leaders have helped thousands in different ways to hear the voice of the Lord say to them, as that same voice to Paul. “Go into the city and you will be told what to do.” “I have appeared to you to designate you as my servant and as a witness to what you have seen in me so that you may open the eyes of those to whom I am sending you, to turn them from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to the dominion of God that through their faith in me they may obtain the forgiveness of their sins and a portion among God’s people.”

And because the voice of the Lord was heard and hearts, like Paul, surrendered to the love in that voice – so much has happened in this Diocese of Des Moines

- The community has gathered for the Eucharist
- The word of God has been proclaimed
- The poor were cared for-The sick were attended to.
- The broken and sinful were forgiven
- Dignity was restored and affirmed
- The young were educated
- The children in the womb were defended
- Justice was spoken of over and over
- The word went out that every person – man, woman and child was made to the image and likeness of God.

And life is a journey and victory lies in having made the journey stage by stage.

At the same time we do not rest on those one hundred years. Rather we look to the future taking this more than a golden opportunity to look to the future and the building of the Church for the future through a deeper awakening to Jesus Christ.

*And life is a journey and victory
lies in having made the journey
stage by stage.*

Awakening to Christ, this is your theme for this gathering. It reflects that beautiful prayer offered by the late Archbishop Oscar Romaro when he reflects on the part that we play in the magnificent venture of bringing forth the Kingdom of God:

“We are workers, not master builders;
ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.”

Step by step. Day by day – every day – that is the way to go. What a great privilege it is for all of us to be gathered here this morning and for me to be with you.

I come from Upstate New York. I well remember the winter Olympics in Lake Placid in 1980. Lake Placid is not far from my own home. For some who won there was an instant fame. For others who won at Lake Placid there was wealth. But for one champion, it was a harsh nightmare she would long remember and not easily forget.

I speak of Beth Heiden – the winner of a bronze medal for speed skating – third best in the world. The day which should have been the most fulfilling of her life – when she received the bronze medal – when she should have been congratulated – she was ruthlessly questioned on why she hadn’t done better. Beth Heiden simply broke down and cried like a baby.

People can expect too much even from champions. And champions are the victims of a heartless success oriented system – a success oriented culture in which a person’s worth is often tied to production and achievement.

Having and doing equals value. This is the standard in our culture and one might say has been the standard since the ape-man or ape-woman first invented fire.

Jesus knew all this and He knew what it would do to Olympic champions like Beth Heiden. He knew what it would do to champions like you or like me. It was this same Jesus, however, who said to those first Apostles: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always until the end of the age.”(Matthew 28:19-20) And, it was this same Jesus who said to those same Apostles who were going to bring His name to the ends of the earth: “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were all ready blazing.” (Luke 12:49)

But Jesus seemed to have known the Apostles better than they knew themselves. Jesus knows you and knows me better than we know ourselves and even though He has given us this tremendous task of setting fire to the world and bringing His name to the nations He spoke some very important words on the night before He died.

And so on the blessed night He assembled that small circle of friends – the Apostles – the ones who were going to take His name to the ends of the earth. And He gave a final pep talk for them and for the Church. That pep talk takes the form of a prayer which was overheard by those friends and which, thank God, was overheard by the Church. He wanted to express to them and to you and to me those things closest to His heart.

Things to remember.

The basics, the essentials for the Church.

What does Jesus ask for? What does He feel that they need? What does Jesus feel that you and I really need to hear above all else if we are going to Evangelize and if we are going to make disciples of all nations and if we are going to help Jesus Christ set fire to the earth?

1. He doesn't pray that those Apostles or you and I be brilliant or prudent or even strong.
2. He doesn't pray that those Apostles or you and I be mindful of our tremendous responsibilities.
3. He doesn't lay a guilt trip on them for being ungrateful or inadequate and let's face it those first Apostles as has happened down through the centuries were ungrateful, were inadequate and were obtuse.
4. He doesn't say: "These are my expectations "Or, these are the worlds expectations." "Or, these will be the peoples expectations."

Instead, He speaks to them of "The Gift." He reminds them of what has been given free of charge, no strings, no downpayment – the gift of Divine Love. He prays that this same love that the Father has for Jesus, He will give to those Apostles and give to you and give to me. That love is not based on performance or achievement. It is spontaneous. The only thing that Jesus speaks of on that glorious night is that they retain the gift and that they remain in His love. The only thing that He speaks of is His friendship that He offers to those Apostles and to you and to me.

How easy that is to forget. We try so hard to fulfill the thousand and one expectations we set for ourselves. We become success oriented. We become program oriented and when a program falls apart or we don't get the gold medal we become discouraged, disoriented and even angry.

My self-worth at this moment is measured by how much I have accepted that beautiful gift of friendship that Jesus has offered to me. That's what my self-worth is measured by.

On that very same night Jesus spoke to those who were going to take his message to the ends of the earth: "No one has greater love than this that one should lay-down his life for his friend. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves because the slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father." The Lord is permitting me and permitting you, limited and simple and often a burden to ourselves to be His friend. Not to respond to this invitation, not to respond to that invitation to remain in His love, not to respond to the great prayer that Jesus made on that night before He died that the Father would love me as the Father would love Jesus, not to respond to His invitation to remain in that love could be unsettling in my life as an Evangelizer because evangelizing means bringing the good news of Jesus into every human situation and seeking to renew individuals and society by the divine power of the Gospel itself. The essence of Evangelization is the proclamation of salvation in Jesus and the response of a person in faith, both being the work of the Spirit of God.

Evangelization must always be directly connected to the Lord Jesus Christ. "There is no true Evangelization if the name, the teaching, the promises, the Kingdom and the Mystery of Jesus of Nazareth the Son of God are not proclaimed." (On Evangelization in the Modern World, 22) So you and I, teachers about Jesus Christ,

going out into the whole world to proclaim Jesus, we cannot proclaim Him unless we know Him. We cannot proclaim His name unless in some way we are in relationship to Him. We cannot bring that name to our schools, to our institutions, unless we remain in His love and this is an important lesson for any one of us today.

We want results and we forget the wise counsel of Archbishop Oscar Romaro when he wrote: “We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.” And, we forget the beautiful words of Jesus Christ: “Remain in my love. Remain in my love. I do not want you to be servants. I want you to be my friends.

Then the words of Jesus Christ on that same night: “I want you to be My friends not servants” – become faint.

Evangelization is about conversion. The Bishops of the United States in 1992 spoke about this conversion. They speak about the change that occurs in believers through the power of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit. They point out that conversion happens in many ways – through sudden changes and through gradual growth, in children as well as adults – but that each of us must experience this fundamental change.

The Bishops tell us that conversion is the change of our lives that comes through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is crucial: we must be converted and we must continue to be converted. We must let the Holy Spirit change our lives! We must respond to Jesus Christ and we must be open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit who will continue to convert us as we follow Christ. If our faith is alive it will be aroused again and again as we mature as disciples. The Bishops go on to remind us that each of us must undergo personal renewal. Professor of Theology – personal renewal. Each minister of the Gospel – personal renewal. Each Bishop – personal renewal. Each priest or deacon or religious – personal renewal. Each lay person who is involved in the breathtaking adventure of bringing forth the Kingdom of God – personal renewal. And, we look to Jesus Christ and His blessed word on how that renewal can take place in our lives: “Remain in my love.” “You are My friends, not my servants.”

Leon Bloy, a philosopher once wrote: “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.” Jesus speaks of this joy: “I have spoken to you thus, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” Isn’t ministry all about Jesus and His life? Isn’t it all about the story of Jesus in my life? And, isn’t it all about giving Jesus Christ to others? His joy, His love.

If Jesus had joy it is by reason of that inexpressible love which He has experienced from the Father. The joy about which Jesus speaks comes out of the font of an awareness that the Father loves Him, the Father is with Him.

“You are my Son, the Beloved, my favor rests on you.”

“I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”

“I love the Father, I am doing exactly what the Father told me.”

“The Father loves me because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.”

It is what St. Paul speaks of when he writes: “Nothing, nothing can outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Jesus Christ. Ministry is not work. It cannot be. Evangelization is not work. It is the story of God in my life. It is the story of the gift in my life. It is the story of sharing this joy and this gift which comes from knowing the gift.

The fruit of Evangelization has changed lives in a changed world – holiness and justice, spirituality and peace. The validity of our having accepted the Gospel does not come from what we feel or what we know; it comes also from the way we serve others, especially the poorest, the most marginal, the most hurting, the most defenseless, the least loved. An Evangelization that stays inside ourselves is not an Evangelization into the good news of Jesus Christ. It is a vision we share and it is in the power of the good news. As it compels us, we believe it can compel by its beauty and its truth, all who sincerely seek God. How different our world would be if everyone would accept the good news of Jesus and share the vision of faith.

Pope John Paul II has reminded us: “We need heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who know the depths of the human heart, who can share the joys, the hopes, the agonies, the distress of people today, but who are, at the same time, contemplatives who have fallen in love with God. Modern man listens more readily to witnesses than to teachers and if he listens to teachers it is because they are witnesses.”

You my friends, we must fall in love with God. We must be the people who witness and witness to what? Witness to our friendship with Jesus Christ. Witness to the fact that we have listened to Jesus Christ. Witness to the fact that we have listened to Jesus when He reminds us to remain in His love. Jesus did an amazing thing. He gave us an intimacy with God so that God is no longer a distant stranger but our intimate friend. The pages of the Gospel remind us of this.

Ronald Knox reminds us that it is his reproach to the world, not that the Savior came to the lost and the lost ran away from him, not that the creator came to the creature and the creature rejected him but that the friend came unto his own and his own received him not. If we accept him as friend everything about us is reshaped and rethought. And, how much he wants that friendship.

You have been chosen to carry out the intention of Christ on earth and to continue the mission which He started. But you must first learn to live as the friend of Christ. You must first learn to remain in His love. Christ’s choice for you is one of love. His motive is love. He chose those Apostles in order to have them with Him. He sent them to preach and the first sermons are always of God’s wonderful love. They preached this message because Jesus revealed to them, His friends, everything that the Father had made known to Him – the secrets of the heart of God. The message intended for the world was first of all confided by Christ to His friends. And what Christ came to do is accomplished by you and me: “As the Father has sent me, I also send you.”

In appointing Peter the visible head of the Church, He made one condition: “Do you love me?” By love alone can Peter fulfill the responsibility put on him and by love alone, my dear friends, can you fulfill the responsibility put on you of teaching the young about the wonderful things of God.

To the servant one speaks of work. To the friend one speaks of intimacy. The truth of your lives as teachers of the Gospel is friendship with Christ. The truth of your lives as Evangelizers is friendship with Christ – remaining in His love. “I call you friends, not servant.” Friendship speaks of a relationship between person and person and not a relationship of function and service. Friendship supposes mutual confidence.

All of us are tempted to forget that Jesus Christ, the great Evangelizer, busy man that He was, stretched to the limit physically and emotionally by the demands of His

work, left the sick unhealed, the mourning uncomforted, the ignorant untaught, and stole off by Himself to meet His Father in deep prayer. Jesus Christ certainly prayed.

Coming through the picture of the constant prayer of Jesus is the connection that somehow His apostolic zeal, His dedication to the Father's will is something which is ultimately connected with His prayer, as though prayer was its daily source.

The Father is in me and I am in the Father.

This is my Beloved Son, Listen To Him.

Hebrews tell us that prayer is the eternal posture of Jesus. What is He doing right now? He is praying for you and me.

He is the high priest with compassion. He knows that things in life are not easy.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER IN OUR LIVES

We are tempted to forget that Jesus Himself, busy man that he was, stretched to the limit physically and emotionally by the demand of His work, left the sick unhealed, the mourning uncomforted, the ignorant untaught, and stole off by himself to meet His Father in deep prayer.

We pray, as Thomas Merton put it, not to recharge our batteries to go back to the concerns of our daily life, but rather to be transformed by God so that the myths and fictions of our life might fall like broken shackles from your wrists.

As Gerard Manley Hopkins says: "These things have always been there but for the eyes of the beholder."

Teilhard de Chardin – the Divine Milieu that Jesus Christ is shining through the whole world but only for those who have eyes to see.

Our thirst for the experience of God is clearly already the work of God and is therefore prayer already because it is communion with God—the work of God.

We are poor creatures, limited. We pray out of that poverty, out of our need. Certainly, teachers of theology can give powerful lessons about the faith. The question is, do we share it? Does our living faith lead to the conversion of minds and hearts to Jesus Christ? Does the fire of the Holy Spirit blaze in them? That fire of the Holy Spirit will burn in our own hearts when we try every day to experience God. And God will always speak to us – heart to heart without words but our hearts will be on fire and we will have fallen in love with the Lord.

You and I need God. We need to remain in His love. We need to experience His friendship daily in our prayer and daily in our relationship with Him. Then that same Spirit that Jesus Christ sends upon everyone who is baptized in His name will become a vibrant Spirit. We have all gone down into the water of Christ and have been anointed to bring good news and be true disciples. We have all received His Spirit. This is not a Spirit of timidity or fear but a bold Spirit of life, truth, joy and grace.

Without a relationship with Jesus Christ, charity is nothing but human fellowship.

Without the relationship the sacraments are no more than magical rites.

Without the relationship prayer is vain speech, liturgy no more than pantomime or sacred theatre.

Without the relationship, catechetics is a catalog or more preachment; and the Gospel and all Scripture are venerable mythology.

Without the relationship, ecumenism becomes a pious comedy since there is no religious unity that does not require, sooner or later, a deep commitment to Jesus Christ and to the Gospel.

How beautiful it is to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to a nation and how blessed we all are to have the chosen.