

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
Christ Our Life Conference
October 16, 2010
Wells Fargo Arena, Des Moines

Welcome, my good friends, to Des Moines and the Christ Our Life Conference. We thank his Eminence, Francis Cardinal Arinze, for traveling from Rome to be with us and to provide his customary infectious inspiration. We are most grateful to Bishop John Quinn, Bishop of Winona, Bishop Walker Nickless, Bishop of Sioux City, and our own Bishop Joseph Charron, Bishop Emeritus of Des Moines, for joining us and providing support for the regional nature of this convocation.

This particular event provides evidence of the emergence of the laity as envisioned by the Second Vatican Council. While there is clerical participation, the Christ Our Life Conference was conceived by the laity, organized and carried out by the laity. We owe heartfelt appreciation to the array of individuals, especially some remarkably dedicated women, namely, Marilyn Lane and Ellen Miller under the tutelage of Monsignor Joseph McDonnell, for their admirable courage and tireless efforts in making this event a reality. They possess a profound love of the Lord Jesus, the Christ, and Christ's Body in the world today, the Church. They are inspired to share this love with all of us and enable our community to grow in the bonding of the Spirit.

Jesus Present In the World Today

The historic Jesus Christ, who lived in a very specific time and place is very much rooted in our consciousness. We constantly seek to immerse ourselves in the rich legacy he left us. We strive to imbibe His penetrating message, be enlightened by the actions of the Gospels, and be joined with Him in His death and resurrection.

Remarkably, this Jesus is not only an historic figure, whose memory continues to fashion us. He is actually present to us and in relationship to us. It is in the present that we are being

awakened to his being with us. It is now that he calls each of us to discipleship requiring ongoing conversion. Through prayer, through the life of the sacraments, especially Eucharist and reconciliation, we encounter the Christ. His Word, the Scriptures, speak to each of us in the now penetrating the heart of the willing listener.

Always acting in unison with her beloved Son, the prominent appearances of the Blessed Virgin Mary demonstrate the cultural identification of God with us. God engages us in our life experiences and those dimensions that constitute us as a particular group in the human family with our unique traditions, customs and languages.

Examples of this cultural alignment are many. In Europe, Our Lady has appeared at Lourdes in France, at Fatima in Portugal, at Knock in Ireland. She is deeply revered by the Vietnamese as Our Lady of La Vang. Mary came to the people of Africa in her appearance at Kibeho. Mary, as declared by Pope John Paul II, is the patroness of the Americas under the title of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Always representing her Son, she validates the fact that the Father extends His love, His care, His word to us in the particular cultural context each with its richness and unique character.

In real time, you and I are strongly influenced and inspired by our peers, by popular culture and the means of communication. We are influenced by friends and contemporaries and by those who exercise leadership among us.

In keeping with this reality and seeking to enrich our relationship with Christ in the present moment, prominent international speakers have been assembled to be with us, to open fresh possibilities of growing this relationship with God through the sharing of their experience. They will tell how Christ has engaged them and the means they utilize to keep the flame of faith

burning in their lives. They will unfold the remarkable array of resources readily available to us to live and grow in the faith of the Catholic Church.

We welcome Francis Cardinal Arinze who was awakened to the gift of faith in the missionary environment of Nigeria. He has served the universal Church in leadership roles espousing interreligious relationships and as Prefect of the Congregation for Sacraments and Divine Worship has guided us in the central mysteries of our living faith.

Matthew Kelly was born in Sydney, Australia and helps us address a global culture which preaches that happiness is to be attained in the here and now through material comfort and sensual pleasure. He will help us move beyond what the world prescribes for happiness to authentic joy.

Through our relationship with the living Christ and attending to the development of our life in the Church, Matthew invites us to attain what has emerged as his signature theme: “Becoming the Best Version of Yourself.”

Marino Restrepo from Colombia was entangled early on with worldly attractions, resulting in immoral choices and drug use. At one point, Marino was taken hostage by Columbian rebels for over six months. In what proved to be a moment of Grace, God revealed to him the rich treasures of the Catholic faith.

In all of our lives the Refrain of Rabbi Kushner’s, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, perplexes us and oftentimes sows seeds of doubt. From her personal experience, Renee Bondi will help us explore the reality of evil and suffering. She will probe how dealing with misfortune can introduce us further into the Christian mystery.

The story of Father Rick Wendell is replicated all too frequently by American collegiates and young adults. They regard the onset of personal freedom as an opportunity for license and

capitulation to the vices so tempting to young people. In encounters with Christ, Father Wendell eventually heard and responded to Christ's call to minister as His priest.

Once privileged to taste and be nourished by the fullness of life which Christ communicates, we are sent to witness this God-filled life as did the apostles, disciples; friends and family of Jesus. We become the hearts and hands of Jesus in our service to others. The story of Marcus MacFarlane-Barrow will stimulate the vision of what it means to be committed to the Christian ethic as demonstrated by his tireless labors on behalf of Scottish International Relief and Mary's Meals.

As we allow these committed, faith-filled, talented, and credible speakers to enter our worlds, we will be moved to fuller realization and appreciation of the gift of faith given to each of us. From this faith we explore the call to address the challenges of witnessing to this faith, introducing Jesus to others in the 21st century.

We are also moved to call to mind those who have struck a chord, influenced and stirred into flame faith in our hearts. We think of our parents, grandparents, our spouses, children, siblings, and family. Perhaps there is a teacher, a nun, a priest or deacon who stands out because that individual had so genuinely incorporated the life of Christ into their own lives and have been shining examples influencing us for life.

One such person for me is a cousin who lives in Thurles, County Tipperary, Ireland. His name is Paddy Ryan.

Paddy and his family organized a wonderful gathering of the Ryan Clan, attracting 120 from America, Australia, England, and Ireland who had some form of attachment to the Ryan lineage of Ireland. As the days of the family events went on, Paddy's sterling character and deeply embedded faith became more evident. He was highly respected and warmly loved by his

children. He had worked two jobs nearly all his life to provide a Catholic and academically strong education for his six kids. In addition, fellow townspeople and friends deferred to his leadership and manifested extraordinary respect for him.

I gained an insight into his life with Christ when along with my immediate family we joined Paddy and his wife at their home for morning tea. Paddy and I eventually strolled through the beautifully cultivated garden in the back of his property. We were enjoying a rare day in Ireland with the garden bathed in warm, brilliant sunshine.

Paddy and I eventually arrived at an artificial well with a bucket and rope suspended from a handle.

He stopped there and asked me: “Do you know what I think of when I come to this well?”

“No, Paddy, what is it that you think of when you come to this well?”

“I think of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well and how sensitively and kindly he opened up to her the story of her life. In the process, He revealed to her that the water she was drawing would not satisfy. Instead, the water that he, Jesus, would provide is the water of life. Anyone who drinks of this water will never thirst again.”

Paddy confessed that it is this Jesus whom he encounters. He can vouch that his thirst has been quenched, by the fresh, life-giving water Jesus provides.

It was evident that Paddy opened himself to Jesus in the present. Christ enters into his life. Christ is his life.

Our speakers who gather with us in these days and we who speak to each other of our desires and experiences open ever wider the doors for Christ to enter more fully into our lives who provides nourishment and satisfies our thirst.

As Jesus demonstrated through the example of his prayer and as my cousin, Paddy Ryan, showed us by his practice, praying is critical. Accompanying this and certifying the effectiveness of prayer is commitment to regularity of prayer and finding a place for ourselves where prayer comes easily and naturally.

Elijah, when he was being called by God for a prophetic mission did not hear the direction of the Lord in a strong and heavy wind, rending the mountains and crushing rocks, nor in an earthquake nor in the fire. Elijah heard God revealed in a whispering sound that touched and moved his heart. (I Kings 19; 11-12)

In our tumultuous times, exploding with noise and distraction and with frenetic activity, are we being called to be agents of calm, of peace where Christ can be discovered and experienced?

The political world is rife with polarization. The shouting is deafening. Civility has disappeared. Self-interest is the order of the day. The common good takes a back seat to the prerogatives of the individual.

All too well do we know the precious gift of life from conception to natural death is compromised and the dignity of the human person is trampled upon in war, in injustice, in prejudice, and unnecessarily by deprivation of food and basic human rights. These realities exist because of our lack of commitment to that family to which all of us belong, the human family, in which all of us are sons and daughters of God. Pope Benedict XVI commenting on the Our Father prayer, captures this sense of solidarity when he states: “In this sense, the Our Father is at once a fully personal and thoroughly ecclesial prayer. In praying the Our Father, we pray totally with our own heart, but at the same time we pray in communion with the whole family of God, with the living and the dead, with men of all conditions, cultures and races. The Our Father

overcomes all boundaries and makes us one family.” (Jesus of Nazareth, Pope Benedict XVI, page 141)

In the midst of roiling turmoil, as our faith nevertheless grows stronger, as our lives become totally enmeshed with Christ, we instinctively know that He is present and active in the now. The light and love of the Father through Christ will ultimately prevail. We rejoice that through Him and in company with one another we are constantly invited to move out of the shadows of doubt to the bright, challenging light of faith which stimulates witness to our loving and ever faithful God.

Cardinal George in his book, The Difference God Makes specifies the mission which we believers should be about: “The primary service the Church can render to the world is to direct all toward Christ the Redeemer, the center of the universe and of history” in whom God’s love and mercy are fully revealed. Christians take up this service out of love for God and for their neighbors, but also in order to imitate God’s own self-giving love by sharing with others the riches of their radically new life. Our obligation comes “not only from the Lord’s mandate but also from the profound demands of God’s life within us. . . .” “the love of Christ urges us on.” (2 Cor 5:14) (The Difference God Makes, Cardinal Francis George, page 151)

With Thomas, you and I touch Christ’s wounds and his open side and boldly say: “My Lord and My God!” We address Him in the moment, in the present. With Christ, we are about the Father’s business – enabling and calling forth His Kingdom and being agents of a hope that can never be extinguished.