

Speech given on Wednesday, March 28th, 2007 at the Holiness in the 21st Century reflection day by Fr. Al Baca.

Good afternoon. Thank you Kevin for your introduction and your invitation to be a part of this day as you reflect on “Holiness in the 21st Century.” I am very happy and honored to be invited to address you on a subject that is at the heart of everything we are and everything we do. As a Catholic priest I represent a long tradition of reflection, writing and prayer on the subject of holiness. Actually, everything I speak about today will resonate with the other ancient churches of the East, the Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox. The differences will mainly be cultural but the basic tenets of holiness, our relationship to God and our responsibility to each other will be very similar. I hope that much of what I say today will resonate with you also.

In all our traditions there are great souls who have come so close to the Lord that they amaze us, attract us and engage us – moving us to examine and to confront within us those habits, ways of acting and ways of thinking that fall so very short of Jesus Christ. In the Catholic tradition you are familiar with some of them: St. Augustine (430 AD) who was prolific in his writings on Christian life: “Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I love Thee. You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for You. In my unloveliness I plunged into lovely things which You created. You were with me but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet had they not been in You they would have not been at all. You called, You shouted, You broke through my deafness. You flashed, You shined, and You dispelled my blindness. You breathed Your fragrance on me... You touched me, and I burned for Your peace!” (Confession of St. Augustine) St. Francis of Assisi, the great friend of the poor, (1226 AD): “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.” Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1997): “People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered; forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives, be kind anyway. If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies, succeed anyway. If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you; be honest and frank anyway. What you spend years building someone could destroy over night; build anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous; be happy anyway. The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world the best you have anyway. You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them.”

These are words that compel us to look deeper into our own discipleship and to measure ourselves against concrete examples of holiness. These are people who having been transformed by the Gospel, in some way have become living Gospels who by their lives give witness to the saving mercy and love, the lordship of the Savior Jesus Christ in our world. It seems though that such disciples are not often in great abundance. Our hope is always to lead those entrusted to us to authentic discipleship and we understand that if we are to be successful it has to begin with us.

People notice the difference you know. There is a hunger to see an authentic Christianity in our world today. The Word of God holds us accountable to and responsible for the things we preach. And it should be this way. If the people cannot see the transforming grace of Christ working in us, if they cannot see our humility, our generosity, our patience and our love then they will look to another. Preaching holiness is not as good as living holiness! So what does Catholic tradition have to say about holiness?

Briefly I would like to cover a few theological points regarding the **what** of holiness and conclude today with some concrete examples of the **how** of holiness in the Catholic tradition.

The first call to holiness begins with the biblical revelation of the creation of the first man and woman. In the book of Genesis, chapter one, verse 27, we are told, “God created man in His image. In the image of God He created him. Male and female He created them.” This verse sets up for all time and eternity the special relationship that exists between God and man which does not exist even for the angels. Man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God and because of this are assured of a dignity that cannot be removed or discarded. The gift of “image and likeness” means that the man must forever recognize in his neighbor, in the stranger and even in his enemy, the likeness and image of God. This is the first place, the foundation from which holiness springs. All human life is valuable, an unrepeatable masterpiece of God’s creation. Made in the image of God, human beings are meant for an eternity of joy and peace with their Maker and even though they have fallen into sin they still maintain forever the dignity of being made in the Divine Image. If this is so then it means that all human beings are deserving of respect and reverence even if they are very far from God. For the Christian this is an important point. If as Scripture says, that man is made in His image, then it means that we as followers of Christ must be the first to acknowledge this and to defend this. This is why the Caste System found still in India is absolutely at odds with the Genesis account, as would be slavery, prejudice and racism.

It is the glory of the human being that all are created in the image of God. Nevertheless, we must still remember that the glory of the first man and woman was eventually stained and diminished by the first sin. Prompted by the devil but not forced, our parents Adam and Eve freely chose to move away from God and His Lordship over them. In Catholic belief this was cataclysmic and created a chasm that could not be bridged except by one man, the Man God Jesus Christ. He becomes Jacob’s ladder whereby grace and peace become once again the conversation between heaven and earth. In ancient icons of the Orthodox East the Resurrected Christ will often be shown stepping over the cross that

like a bridge connects Him to the many souls who have waited for redemption. It is by Christ alone that we are restored to the Father and the promise of eternal happiness. The first gift of Satan is in fact mortality: that is death. The first gift of the new Adam is immortality: everlasting life in the Kingdom. The follower of Christ then is the one that through belief in the Son of God is reconciled to the Father and restored to grace.

In the ancient churches it is Baptism that becomes the door that opens the soul to restorative grace. The World Council of Churches in 1982 produced a wonderful study on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry that I recommend to your reading. Written in brief format it sets out the convergences and differences between the churches of the Christian family regarding Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. Under the section on Baptism, it is noted and I quote, "That Christian baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus. It unites the one baptized, with Christ and with His people. The Baptism which makes Christians partakers of the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection implies confession of sin and conversion of heart. Thus those baptized are pardoned, cleansed and sanctified by Christ, and are given as part of their baptismal experience a new ethical orientation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is related not only to momentary experience, but to life-long growth into Christ. Those baptized are called upon to reflect the glory of the Lord as they are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, into His likeness, with ever increasing splendor."

So once again we find ourselves brought to the fundamental truth of likeness and image of God, now crowned with the act of repentance and conversion to the person of Jesus Christ who saves us from sin and eternal death. Restored to glory by Jesus Christ, by His atoning death and resurrection, we are recreated and brought into the very love that exists between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The passion, death and resurrection not only restore us to what was before but also create in us a new identification with the Savior. We are made new in Christ. So now we are brought to a new juncture. We recognize that because we are made in the image and likeness of God there is a fundamental reverence that should be shown to all human beings. People are not plants or exotic animals but persons destined to be a part of the eternal plan. It is however, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we are reconfigured, made new and aligned with Him forever. All of our churches recognize that it is through Christ alone that any of us are saved; it is by His atoning act that we are brought back into friendship with the Father, our future life restored to us, and the Holy Spirit welcomed to take His place within our souls. Baptism is the action that describes this new relationship with Christ. It represents an absolute realignment of the human being with God, brings us into a new family of fellow disciples, the Church, makes us adopted children of God and coheirs to the Kingdom of Heaven. But Baptism is not magic. It is not a moment in life celebrated and then forgotten or ignored. Baptism sets up within the receiver real responsibilities. It is formative, shaping us sometimes in spite of our warring passions and earthbound inclinations. There are inbuilt consequences to the act of giving over to Christ. These can be consuming and at times lead the believer to the highest expression of discipleship, martyrdom. In the ancient Churches of the East there was the custom of surrounding Baptismal rooms with mosaics displaying the martyrdom of the early disciples of Jesus in graphic detail. The message was that Baptism and incorporation into the Body of Christ

was serious business. It was a last reminder of what might be asked of the one baptized some day in some new persecution of the people of God.

For those brought into new life with Jesus being born again was only the beginning. The splendor of Baptism continued and was displayed by the life of the believer that over time took on greater witness and a natural holiness. Something really did happen when water was poured and the words of Christ repeated. We were brought into the person of Jesus – we became Christians. Now we are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit into His likeness and we share in His life as well as identifying with and committing ourselves to an assembly of believers. The Catholic Church and the Orthodox and Eastern Oriental Churches understand the essential element of personal faith for the believer but for us the action of Baptism is more than incorporation into a certain church or community of believers. It is an action that sets us apart for Christ, marks us forever as belonging to Him, and gives us new life through the words of Christ, the emersion or pouring of water three times and the invocation of the Trinity. Regeneration of the soul happens and the life of Christ begins to take root within us and transform the human being with its cooperation and assent. That transformation leads to an awakening and an understanding that we must be about building up His kingdom.

The personal conviction has to lead to community engagement. Very simply, if we have been brought into new life with Christ it has to show. And it has to happen naturally. Holiness is not contrived and planned out. Holiness is the fruit of the life of Jesus in us. The more and more we surrender ourselves to the Will of God the more and more we begin to take on the grace of the Spirit. Remember Moses in the Book of Exodus and how with each conversation on the mountain with God or later in the tent before the Holy of Holies, his face glowed brighter and brighter – to the point that he began to place a veil over his face in humility. Our holiness has to be that natural. As we converse more deeply with God and continue to leave behind the old man for the new, holiness begins to make itself understood. Catholicism and the Holiness Movement both appreciate this truth. We have to make a difference.

There is some sense in which we understand that to belong to Christ means that we have to bring the Good News to the world, that we carry the seeds of transformation and that the Lord wishes to work through us to transform the world. And so we cannot sit in the shadows or wait for another. We, now listening to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit must become apostles. But this is not about works! Pope John Paul use to often say that the quality of human life was not dependent on or measurable by what you could do but who you were: made in the image and likeness of God. Holiness **is** about doing things for God but it has to start first with being at one with and reconciled to God. The things we do, the more observable marks of holiness, flow from that foundational relationship with God in the person of Jesus Christ.

In the County of Orange you will discover many of the challenges that can be found in any American city today. Homelessness, the challenge of poverty, gangs, drug and

alcohol abuse, spousal abuse, to name just a few. I would like to share with you two aspects of holiness that I think will be useful to remember. First that holiness has a price and that it can appear to be failure and not success.

Five years after I was ordained I was sent to a parish church in the heart of downtown Santa Ana. My first years of priesthood I was the associate priest in Brea in a more or less affluent parish. Problems were not necessarily centered on poverty but more on family disintegration. Drugs though not obvious, were making inroads. Families that looked very respectable on the outside sometimes were suffering terribly on the inside. Santa Ana was a change economically and culturally. In the Santa Ana parish we ministered to an Anglo community from the late 1800's, a sizable Hispanic Community and a Samoan Community. The problems were different but the root cause the same: sin. The first night I arrived to the rectory, around 11pm, a helicopter swooped down outside my second story room, flashing a blinding light through the windows as they searched for someone who had just committed a crime. This became a normal occurrence in a neighborhood that had been invaded by crime and gangs. Part of the expectation of the Church was that a priest assigned to this parish would be involved in ministry to the neighbors and outreach to the gang kids. And that was not easy for me. I had grown up in Orange County but my neighborhood was a mix of peoples and cultures, there were no drug or drinking problems, neighbors were close and kept an eye on each other. There certainly were no gangs.

In my work at St. Joseph's I knew the first step was to gain acceptance but really that came quite easily. Wearing the collar gave me access into neighborhoods that otherwise would have been almost impossible for me to enter. There was a certain amount of trust that already existed on account of the years of work of priests before me who had given their hearts to the parish. I was just continuing along the paths that they had cleared away years before me. The pastor who I ministered with had been in the parish for a number of years and he had mapped out the particulars of engaging the gang kids. We went out to look for the kids, we invited them to the hall where once a week we had a safe place where they could play pool, read books, play basketball, - be kids. Our hope was that from there they would feel more open to listening to us when we challenged their way of life. Following the stories in Scripture of Jesus meeting people where they were and then bringing them into the deep questions of life, like the story of the woman at the well, we just spent time talking about who they were. We listened. This had great results. Along with the invitation to Mass and Bible Study, and to our Prayer Group meetings in the evenings we were able to persuade some kids to investigate what we had to offer.

I remember vividly one young man who had been very involved in the gangs. His family was very involved in the parish and it was a constant anxiety for them that he had left and joined a very violent gang. One night he stepped into a prayer meeting and at the end of it was taken hold by the Lord. He stood up and to the joy of his Mother and Father gave himself back to Christ and promised that he would leave the gang. He made good on his promise. He left the gang, started working in the same company his father worked in, started growing out his hair again, and left behind his gang attire. The day he received his first check he was so excited that he left work going directly home to show his Dad.

Along the way home, and in front of St. Joseph church he was shot and murdered. He died on the steps of the church killed by his gang friends who resented that he had left them. The first person to find him was his little brother who coincidentally was riding home from playing with friends and saw his brother dying. The pastor ran out to the steps of the church, held him and blessed him as he slipped away. It was one of the most devastating moments of our ministry in that parish.

A gang kid once asked me what I, as a priest, could possibly give him. If he left the gang what assurances could I give him that he wouldn't be shot and killed. It was a good question. My answer was that I really couldn't give him any assurances of safety. There was only one thing I could assure him of. I could not promise him that he wouldn't be killed if he left the gang. The only thing I could promise him, on my word as a priest, was that he would be saved from hell and brought to the Kingdom of Heaven. The demands of holiness are such that sometimes there is a terrific cost involved. To restore the dignity of our Christian souls sometimes exacts a great price of us or from others. It would seem, sometimes, that to follow Christ involves what appears to be failure. People die, kids are buried, families are burdened but it is still the right path. We must never measure ourselves purely on numbers or on success stories. We measure ourselves on the Gospel and on the Lord and on the right thing to do. Personal suffering for the sake of Christ is always to be treasured. To die for Christ, to suffer the mockery of others for His truth, to be a Jeremiah misunderstood or a Paul moving from town to town until captured and finally taken to Rome and martyrdom. A cost is often to be noted but don't be afraid. Holiness brings us into the mystery of Christ's own sufferings.

My second story that I should like to share with you has to do with a home that we built, large and ample, for upwards of 24 people, for people suffering from HIV. The hope was to build something in a neighborhood that would look like any other house. Anyone living in the house would have to be free of drugs and would have to agree to live according to Christian virtue. We would not take their medicade but through funds from caring people we would supplement what was needed to run the house smoothly. Everything was in place. The city of Santa Ana was cooperating, a religious order of brothers would care for the clients, a chapel would be on the grounds, Catholics and non-Catholics were accepted into the program. It was not important to us as to whether the HIV was contracted through sex, through needles or transfusions. It was important that once a commitment was made to live in the house each person would live morally a Christian life. Everything moved along except with the neighbors. Most were afraid that needles would be left in trashcans or that people with AIDs would sneeze on the children and infect them. The fear level was high. House by house I went speaking to the neighbors – my Spanish and English speaking skills being very handy. The Hispanic families after listening to me made the commitment to trust me. I have to admit I felt humbled by the trust they put in me and burdened at the same time. The burden was the possible failure of our assurances on safety not being met. If I broke the trust it would have greater consequences. In the end, the trust was kept, the building Emmanuel House was constructed, the brothers did arrive to care for the sick, and the neighbors are at peace. I should say that our greatest opposition was from a minister and his wife who though they did not live in the area, they owned a set of apartments. They were afraid

that property values would go down – not an altogether unreasonable assumption. I met with them and we had a very fruitful conversation. I explained how HIV was contracted and not contracted. With the full facts they were able to trust. I remember that at the end of our last meeting we prayed together. Emmanuel House was founded in 1999 the first residence to be built in California to shelter homeless people who have AIDs or are HIV positive. The neighborhood today has embraced the project. People made in the image of God and worthy of respect. The people of God reaching out and making a difference and bringing Christ to a segment of society that was ignored and/or forgotten. By the way, Emmanuel House was built through the hard work mainly of one man: Father Jerome Karcher, the youngest son of Carl Carcher of Carl's Junior. He has over the years founded, Mercy House for homeless men, Joseph House, a transitional shelter for single men, Regina House, a transitional shelter for single moms, San Miguel residence with units for permanent housing, and in 2006 here in Ontario, Guadalupe Residence and Assisi House for low income families and the soon to be built Mercy House Center, where emergency services and beds will be provided. Though he comes from a very financially secure family he has never depended on his family to fund these projects. They are all funded by good people who have noticed the need and in Christ responded.

I think from the examples I have given you today it can be seen that holiness has an ecclesial element to it that is both normative and constitutive. Holiness is never in isolation and is incapable of being privatized. It is better perhaps seen as a gift of the Spirit that identifies the right relationship of a soul with God. As such it is the state of the man or woman transformed by the Spirit and the dynamic call of the man or woman to in turn transform others and even the world. Holiness has a cost and it should never be measured by way of success and failure (at least by the world's standards). It sometimes is very quiet and unassuming like the mother of the young man who is murdered after he leaves the gang - who in the midst of such violence becomes a pillar of strength and faith in God. It is heroic as people begin to do that which seems beyond their ability to do – forgiving an enemy. It creates a need in the person to make a difference for Christ. And in building up the Kingdom of Jesus Christ it creates that need in others. It is infectious.

If holiness or holy actions don't somehow flow out of a heart taken up by Christ I cannot define that or understand that. He is the author of all good and good can only happen through His inspiration and my participation in His holiness. My faith tells me that only in Christ can I hope to do any lasting good. As a minister of the Lord I am obliged to seek out the holiness of Christ that I might learn of Him and communicate that to others. In that marvelous friendship that develops between Christ and myself I am convicted of my sinfulness and convinced of the need to atone and to transform. Grace builds on nature and in my joy I must communicate that to others and I must build up the Kingdom.

Here is where I conclude. I hope that what becomes clear is that the call to holiness is a serious call that all of us appreciate deeply as Christians. It is a lot more common than most people think. It is not a consequence of some state of perfection because that is impossible in this world. There is a genuinely unique Christian understanding of holiness that is based on the person of Jesus Christ. A Christian lives in a kind of spiritual poverty if he or she feels little motivation to deepen friendship with Christ and consciously, more

and more, move away from sin. New life in Christ demands real and obvious testimony – a real transformation of others but only after we ourselves have begun to go down the radical path of discipleship. Then people are called holy -when they authentically model Christ to us. When we come upon such people we are inspired because we see something beyond this world. We see eternity in everything they do and touch. The year that Pope John Paul died I was studying in Rome. Towards the end he was completely unable to speak, unable to walk, unable to do all the things he loved to do for God. So very diminished physically he radiated the love and tenderness of God in a powerful way. I knew I was in the presence of holiness – I could feel it – it was real and it had been tested. He had run the race heroically. And when he left this world he left behind a study in holiness true and steady – not privatized or self-serving but a constant challenge to do what could be done, to do more for Christ – by way of thankfulness – for the gift of redemption and the gift of friendship with the Savior.

We are anxious for the Kingdom of God. Catholicism like the Holiness Movement to which you belong to, hungers for authentic discipleship and the right ordering of souls toward God. But let the building up of God's kingdom be a natural consequence of our commitment to Christ. As long as we continue to be in the image and of the likeness of Christ and continue to give others the dignity of being made in the image of God the kingdom will be built up and our ministries will be fruitful, not measured by the world's standards but by Christ's. In order to bring peace, genuine peace, to souls; in order to transform the earth and to seek God our Lord in the world and through the things of the world, that is to transform the societies we live in, personal sanctity is indispensable. It begins with you and with me. With personal holiness comes a new way of looking at things – with the eyes of Christ. Then we notice the damage, the broken lines, the injustice, the suffering souls. And when we notice with His eyes there is no turning back.

Thank you.