"Rebuilding from Within: the Path to True and Lasting Joy"

Installation Mass, Feast of St. Francis
October 4, 2012, St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral

Introduction

"Francis, rebuild my house." These words which our Lord spoke to St. Francis from the Cross in the church of San Damiano are certainly well known to us. And repair that little dilapidated structure he did, zealously and within a short time. He did not build a new one, but he repaired an old one; he did not tear out the foundation, but he built upon it.

Of course, as we know and as he discovered, these words had a much deeper, spiritual significance beyond the material reconstruction of a church edifice. St. Francis’ time was one of spiritual unrest, in which ideas were circulating that taught the evil of all created things and saw the condition of the human person as being totally debased, even to the point of denigrating marriage on the claim that it was a purely material reality and brought more debased human beings into the world. There was also a need for the reform of the clergy, who had become self-indulgent and too absorbed with worldly things.

Francis’ response was as timeless as it was simple: holiness. He focused on the universal call to holiness, the inclusion of all of God’s people in the life of the Church and pursuing this call to holiness each according to their vocation in life, but with a particular emphasis on the life of the parish priest – if he lives a holy life, his people will follow after his example. First and foremost, though, he began with himself, knowing that the work of rebuilding ultimately must start from within. It was his personal holiness which led the way in the needed reform of the Church at that time.

Rebuilding from Within

These seem to be perennial themes throughout the life of our Church, and are certainly as applicable to our time as they were to St. Francis’, as well as to any number of other periods in the history of the Church. We, likewise, need to attend to the work of rebuilding – I will not say “begin,” nor even “resume,” but rather “continue” this work, because we have a foundation to build upon and lots of building material to use, just as with the little church of San Damiano.

Of course, as our Father Francis teaches us, that work of rebuilding must necessarily begin within each one of us – clergy, consecrated religious, lay faithful. I know in my own life God has always had a way of putting me in my place, His little and sometimes big ways of reminding me of my need to depend upon Him and to attend to the work of my own rebuilding from within. I would say, though, that with this latest episode in my life God has outdone Himself! (Now, I realize I’m going out on a limb here, because I’m not sure if it’s really theologically correct to speak of God “outdoing Himself,” and here I’m saying this in the presence of him who, until a few weeks ago, was charged with overseeing doctrinal integrity for the entire Church. So, Your Eminence, as your former student, I would ask, please, let’s just keep this off the record.)
I cannot adequately express my gratitude to all of you for the outpouring of love, support and promise of prayers I have received in the wake the regrettable mistake in judgment I made with regard to my driving and for which I apologize. What I found most significant and comforting, though, is that the very many messages of support I received came from people of different religious and political viewpoints. This has made it clear to me that most people have an instinctive sense of compassion, and are naturally inclined to reach out to anyone who is hurting and in need of being bolster by the moral support that only the solidarity of friendship can offer. So we have right here a valuable building block: people’s instinctive sense of compassion. This good will can go a long way in rebuilding God’s house as it manifests itself in the different communities to which we belong.

**The Legacy We Have Inherited**

But there is also a foundation to build upon. We can begin by considering the fact that we are all here because others – our family members principally, but also our teachers, pastors and others – have taken care to hand onto to us the faith and values that we cherish so dearly, and have built a legacy for future generations.

At this time I cannot but think of my own grandfather, who first settled in this city a century ago seeking to escape the poverty and misery of his homeland at the time and build a better life for himself and his new wife and the family they would create together. If someone had told him that in 100 years time his grandson would become the Archbishop of this place, I’m sure he would have thought they were out of their mind!

Yet, what has come to pass is a testimony to the power of faith and the noble vision in the founding of our nation: a land where people are free to develop their full potential according to their merits and hard work; where they can engage their spiritual energy in this great enterprise because they are free to worship as they choose and express their faith in the public square, especially through their service of others; a land where such God-given rights are respected and protected. Yes, in every generation we relearn the lesson that we cannot take these freedoms for granted, but they are woven deep within the American ethos. These founding principles, along with the legacy of our ancestors who have benefitted from them and who have left us a better life because of the values these principles support, remain a foundation for us to build upon.

**The Year of Faith**

The timeliness of what we are about today is significant, though, for an even greater reason: in seven days we Catholics will begin the observance of the “Year of Faith,” called for by Pope Benedict XVI in the motu proprio “Porta Fidei” to mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

He speaks of the situation of our own time, not entirely dissimilar to that of the time of St. Francis: likewise a time of spiritual unrest, a “crisis of faith” as he calls it, in which Christians sometimes take the presupposition of faith for granted and so at times, as he says, are “more concerned for the social, cultural and political consequences of their commitment.”
Pope Benedict, then, is calling us to take a fresh look at the Council, to dig more deeply into the treasures of its wisdom by taking into account these last fifty years of Church life and interpreting them in light of the Church’s 2,000 years of teaching, prayer and lived experience. This is not, then, simply an occasion to relive the excitement of a very eventful period of time in the history of the Church and the world. Rather, he says, the Year of Faith “is a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Savior of the world.”

**Authentic Joy**

In reading through this writing of Pope Benedict, I was struck by how often he touches on the theme of joy. He speaks of rediscovering the “joy of believing” and that faith is received “when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy.” Indeed, joy is the hallmark of the authentic Christian life – that is, a deep, abiding, lasting joy, not the passing happiness of pleasurable experiences.

This must be what our Lord is teaching us in the Gospel reading we just heard proclaimed when he speaks of his yoke being easy and his burden light. I must confess here to another mistaken judgment of mine, in that I so often have difficulty really comprehending this teaching: the burden usually seems anything but light! Of course, I recognize that the problem is me; here again we need to dig deeper into the truth of our Lord’s teaching.

The yoke signifies discipline and direction, and in the tradition of our grandparents in the faith, our Jewish brothers and sisters, it is an image of the acceptance of the obligations of the Torah. The Torah is summed up in what our Lord calls, and every Jewish believer knows is, the greatest commandment, the Shema Israel, which we hear in the Book of Deuteronomy: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.”

Yes, the Lord alone is God, and the love to which He calls us is the love of the covenant, the marriage covenant that He made with His people Israel. God is calling His people to marital fidelity with Him, a mystery to be lived out by everyone, but each in a different way in accordance with their vocation in life. Jesus Christ is the Bridegroom: he gives us his life blood by shedding it on the Cross; the Church receives this seed of life to generate and nourish new children for his Kingdom through the grace of the sacraments and the truth of his teaching. He is the head of his body, the Church, laying down his life for her as a bridegroom for his bride; he calls us, in turn, to the same unconditional fidelity of self-oblative love.

**The Brandmarks of Jesus**

Such fidelity, of course, requires discipline, signified by the yoke: not to restrain us from moving toward joy but, on the contrary, so that our passions might be rightly directed toward it and not go off the wrong path. This will inevitably entail some sort of suffering and much self-sacrifice: perseverance in one’s vocation is impossible without it, and one cannot arrive at authentic joy without persevering in one’s vocation.
What more perfect example can we look to than that of our patron saint whom we celebrate today?

The simple joy of St. Francis is the first image to come to mind when we think of the “poverello of Assisi.” We all yearn for that kind of joy, yet his joy appears so ironic from a worldly perspective: his rejoicing in the goodness of creation against the popular beliefs of the time; what he suffered for Christ in seeking the reform of the Church from within; freely espousing a life of evangelical poverty. His suffering for Christ becomes no more poignantly manifested than in the stigmata he received, those “[brand]marks of Jesus on [his] body” to which St. Paul refers in regard to himself. That word – stigmata – in the ancient world meant a brand placed on an animal and even a slave to indicate ownership by the master. In St. Paul’s case he is referring to the many physical and emotional scars which he endured for the sake of his Lord: illness, floggings, shipwreck, famine, "beasts," "afflictions." All of these were the signs that he belonged to Christ. In the case of our Father Francis, our Lord blessed him with the physical marks of his Passion as a way of certifying his complete conformity to him.

The attainment of holiness is not possible without passing through this way of suffering for Christ, in whichever way he calls each individual to do so. An “easy yoke” does not mean an easy life; it means doing the hard work of spiritual discipline, bearing the marks of our Lord’s Passion in our own lives, so that we may pursue holiness and arrive at the deep, eternal joy he wants for us.

Renewal of the Eucharist

People’s good will and instinctive sense of compassion, the freedoms and values upon which our nation was founded, the treasures to be mined from the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the joy that true believing holds out to us: all of these are building materials we have to work with in the task of rebuilding. Our Father Francis knew, though, that the true reform of the Church would come from a renewal of the sacrament of the Eucharist. This surely is our most valuable building block, indeed the cornerstone, Christ himself present in our midst, the life blood of Jesus Christ shared with us under sacramental signs.

The renewal of this sacrament as central to the life of the Church is effected by attending to all that is connected with it: frequent use of the sacrament of Penance so that we may be properly disposed to worthily receive so precious a gift; the practice of Eucharistic Adoration; study of the Bible and of the content of the faith; daily prayer and, especially, the rosary. Let us not underestimate the power of this prayer, which has brought about true miracles at other turning points in the history of the Church. The daily rosary, prayed individually and, especially, together in the family, is a time-tested means of acquiring spiritual stamina in the face of temptations to settle for mediocrity in the life of faith and even the abandonment of faith altogether.

Conclusion

Let us, then, get on with the work of rebuilding, grateful to those who have gone before us and who collaborate with us in the work of building God’s house, knowing that, “Unless the Lord build the house, [we] labor in vain who build.”
At this point I wish to thank my predecessors, Archbishop Quinn, Cardinal Levada and Archbishop Niederauer, and also Bishop Brom under whom I served for seven years as auxiliary bishop in San Diego. Thank you for your wise counsel and support to me over these years, especially during the past three years in my ministry as the Bishop of Oakland and in particular these last few weeks. By the grace of God I hope to continue the good work you have built up here.

I also wish to thank all of my valued collaborators in the Diocese of Oakland, first and foremost my fellow priests: your love for the Church has always been apparent to me, and I will always remain grateful to you for your support, especially when I have needed it the most. You, along with the deacons, religious and lay leaders have taught me much about envisioning new possibilities for furthering the mission of the Church and putting creative, practical provisions in place to translate that vision into reality. Thank you.

To my new flock here in the Archdiocese of San Francisco, please know how much I am looking forward to getting to know you all and, together with you, crafting a vision and plan for furthering the New Evangelization here and so continue the good work that has been carried out in this local Church for over 150 years. I also look forward to joining with my fellow believers of other faith traditions, and with leaders in the civic community, to work together to advance the common good and to address the many pressing concerns weighing heavily upon the hearts and minds of us all.

This Year of Faith will be a year of grace, a time to deepen our resolve to heed the call to conversion in our life. I look forward to this opportunity in my own life, and I ask you to pray for me, that it may bear fruit for the good of my ministry among you. And let us all seize the opportunity that this year of grace offers us for becoming ever more perfectly conformed to Christ.

The path to holiness lies open before us. Let us use the means the Lord has placed at our disposal, so that with his help we may know the easy yoke of the eternal joy of him who has already won the victory for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.