

Witness to Catholicism in a secular world

By Fr. Callistus Isara, MSP

Introduction

Good evening and welcome to this presentation. I wish to thank the Adult Faith Formation of St. Michael's Catholic Church for organizing this talk every year. I also want to thank all of you for making the sacrifice to attend this talk this evening.

Someone once proudly told me: "I love being a Catholic." My response was: Wow! What a great declaration! Let me ask you at the beginning of this presentation: Are you one of such Catholics who loves being a Catholic? After the profession of faith at children's baptism, the Rite says: "This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus our Lord." It is worth asking: How many Catholics today are proud to profess their faith?

I begin this talk with these questions because of the need for Catholics to cherish their faith. It is by their witness to the faith that Catholics can truly show how much they love being Catholics. This paper first examines the meaning of 'witness' and the call to witness as Christians and Catholics. It then highlights the difficulty of witness to Catholicism today. It further underscores the importance of fidelity to Church teachings as Catholics. It concludes by urging all Catholics to always cherish their faith and proudly bear witness to it.

The meaning of 'witness'

The word 'witness' has a variety of meaning. A 'witness' can be described as someone who testifies on behalf of another person; one who stands for another person. It also means to be present to an event and be able to give an account of it; this is commonly referred to as 'eyewitness.' The Christian meaning of 'witness' is much deeper and stronger. The Christian meaning of 'witness' has its root in the Greek word for 'martyrdom.' The word 'martyrdom' is derived from the Greek word *martyrein* which means 'to bear witness' (Downey, Michael (editor), [The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality](#), p. 632). That means 'martyrdom' and 'witness' are synonymous. From the Christian perspective, martyrdom refers to bearing witness to Christ to the point of death. In the early centuries of the Church, those who bore witness to Christ through indescribable suffering, but were not eventually killed, were referred to as 'confessors.' In this regard, the conviction and witness to the faith in the midst of suffering earned them the title of 'confessors.' For the Christian, a witness is someone who readily stands up for Christ, stays with Christ, and remains with Christ to the point of death. Martyrdom is the ultimate witness of a Christian to Christ.

There were some exceptions in the use of the term *martyrdom* in the early Church. For example, the term *martyrdom* also referred to those who suffered terribly for the faith, imprisoned, and later released from prison before their death. They were referred to as 'martyrs' because they died as a result of the suffering they endured. Origen (d. 253AD), one of the Fathers of the Church, was condemned to death, tortured, imprisoned, and later released before his death. Origen, like other Christians who were released from prison before their death, were referred to as 'martyrs.' They were called martyrs because they sacrificed greatly to witness to Christ though they were not

directly killed. The concept of martyrdom by desire also arose in the early Church. This refers to those who did not experience physical martyrdom, but would have done so if the occasion arose.

It is worth noting that the Church, from the outset till the present, throughout the world continues to produce martyrs who willingly gave their lives to Christ. The Second Vatican Council teaches that martyrdom makes the disciple like Christ the master (Lumen Gentium, no. 42). Vatican II urged all Christians to be prepared to “confess Christ before men and to follow him along the way of the cross amidst the persecutions which the Church never lacks” (Lumen Gentium, no. 42).

The Christian and Catholic vocation

The Christian vocation requires a personal relationship with Christ and the willingness to witness to him daily to the point of death. Even if one does not shed one’s blood in martyrdom, one should be ready to endure the ‘bloodless’ or ‘white martyrdom’ that comes our way every day. The apostles were the first witnesses to Christ and ultimately gave their lives for Christ. In addition to this understanding of Christian witness, a Catholic is called to witness to the Catholic practice of Christianity, to cherish Catholicism, the Church’s Liturgical celebrations, and attest to the Church’s teachings in all its ramifications. As Catholics, the Holy Mass is the highest expression of our faith because the “Eucharistic sacrifice is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (Lumen Gentium, no. 11).

A call to witness as a Catholic

The vocation of the Catholic is to bear witness to Christ. The Acts of the Apostles clearly shows the witness of the apostles and the early Christians to the risen Christ. The apostles were prepared to die rather than stop witnessing to the *Name*. As Peter and John defiantly told the Sanhedrin: “We cannot stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Similarly, there should be a passion, a fire within the Catholic which pushes him or her to bear witness to Christ and his Church in all circumstances including suffering and death.

Scripture enjoins us: “You are the salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13); “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14). As Christians, we are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Our lives and actions should motivate other people to follow Christ and give praise to God. The disciples and early Christians witnessed to the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:32). As Catholics and modern-day disciples of Christ, we are called to bear witness to Christ both in the Church and in the world, in virtue of our baptism and confirmation. Witness of life has always been one of the most effective ways of bearing witness to our Catholic faith. By one’s zeal and fervor for the faith, one shows that one is truly a Catholic. The old saying that “actions speak louder than words,” remains ever true with regard to witnessing to Catholicism and the gospel values.

The Church in Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-4)

This is one of the seven Churches in Asia whom the risen Christ addressed, through the prophet John, as reported in the Book of Revelation. I want to use this passage to underscore what could easily be applicable to Catholics who fail to continually bear witness to the faith.

- “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to

be apostles but are not, but have found them to be false. I also know that you are suffering patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev 2:1-4).

The Church in Ephesus was a very vibrant Church. Paul spent the bulk of his third missionary journey in this Church. Paul’s missionary journey in Ephesus was very successful and fruitful. Paul spent about three years in Ephesus. Paul spent the longest time of his missionary journeys in Ephesus. Evidently, the Church of Ephesus was very dear to the heart of St. Paul. No wonder he made a passionate appeal to them to keep the faith in his emotional farewell to them (Acts 20:17-38). Both Paul and the elders of the Church of Ephesus were in tears after Paul’s farewell to them.

This passage shows very clearly that the Church in Ephesus was doing well and was praised for it by the risen Christ. Despite this, the risen Christ was not happy with the Church in Ephesus because they had abandoned their first love. Their love for the faith was not as strong as it used to be. It seemed that their enthusiasm for the faith had diminished. It also meant that their love for one another had gone cold. That initial fraternal love was no longer there. Hence the risen Christ rebuked them. The Ephesian Church that stood its ground and rebuffed all kinds of heresy had suddenly become cold with diminished intensity and enthusiasm. This once vibrant Church that was dear to Paul’s heart suddenly began to wane in zeal and vigor for the faith.

The experience of many Catholics can be compared to the Church in Ephesus. Many Catholics are initially filled with enthusiasm for the faith and work strenuously for the faith. But somewhere along the line this love and enthusiasm for the faith gradually decreases. Sadly, at some point in life, some Catholics are no longer on fire for the faith. Like the Church in Ephesus, Catholics today should remember their first love so that the faith does not become cold in their hearts. The risen Christ further called the Ephesians to repentance. As Catholics today, we also need repentance not so much for what we have done but for what we have failed to do. Just as the risen Christ confronted the Church in Ephesus, he equally confronts Catholics today to rise from their complacency and become on fire once again for the faith.

Catholic witness and the seven Churches of Asia

The witness of a Catholic in the secular order can be likened to the seven Churches of Asia whom our Lord addressed through the prophet John (Chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Revelation). In addition to the Ephesian Church, the risen Christ rebuked the Church of Laodicea for their indifference to the faith; they were neither hot nor cold for the faith. The risen Christ praised the churches of Smyrna, Pergamum, and Philadelphia, for their fidelity. He encouraged the suffering Church of Smyrna not to lose heart and promised them the crown of life. The Lord rebuked the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira for easily compromising the faith. He warned the Church of Sardis for their laziness and for not taking the faith seriously.

It is pertinent to ask: Which of these seven churches best represent who I am as a Catholic? Do I have less love and commitment for the faith like the Church in Ephesus? Have I at one time or another compromised the faith like some Christians in Pergamum and Thyatira? Am I lazy in the practice of the faith like the Church in Sardis? Am I indifferent to the faith like the Church in Laodicea? Am I willing to suffer for Christ like the Church in Smyrna?

Difficulty of witness to Catholicism today

Thanks be to God there is freedom of religion in the Western world and many other nations. Apart from predominantly Muslim countries where it is extremely difficult to practice Catholicism, many Catholics are relatively free to practice their faith. It is heartwarming to note that even in very difficult places, many Catholics have stood firm in the practice of their faith; they refused to be intimidated.

But in the Western society that prides itself for its religious freedom, it is also becoming increasingly secular and acceptable of varied alternative lifestyles that are at variance with the teachings of the Church. Ironically, the Media sets the tone for morality. The Media considers alternative lifestyles as human rights issues. The secular Media has elevated LGBT to the level of human rights. Anyone who disagrees with the Media's projection of morality is treated with scorn by the Media.

As I pointed out in my talk here two years ago, these are difficult times to be Catholic. But I also pointed out that there has never been an easy time to be a Catholic in the history of the Church. Witnessing to Jesus Christ and Catholicism means that the Catholic has to be countercultural. The Catholic has to be courageous in going against the popular opinion of the Media. As I often say, the Media does not determine the moral life; morality comes from our Christian and Catholic heritage and from natural law.

Fidelity to the Church's teachings as a Catholic

One way of bearing witness to Catholicism is through fidelity to Catholic teachings. The Catholic Church stands out from other Christian churches as a doctrinal Church. *Ab initio*, the Magisterium of the Catholic Church always taught the truths of the faith. The Church bases its teaching on Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church of over two thousand years. The Church teaches with authority following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the greatest teacher *par excellence*. During his earthly ministry, our Lord Jesus Christ spent more time teaching than healing. The faith of Catholics is deepened through the Church's teachings. Hence catechesis is indispensable in the Church. Through the different Ecumenical Councils and other fora, the Church has brought clarity to different aspects of our faith.

Fidelity to Church teachings is an integral part of being a Catholic. A Catholic should assent to and accept all the Church's teachings, even if one sometime has difficulty with a particular teaching. The Catholic should not be selective with regard to Church teachings.

The pro-life teaching of the Church

I wish to single out the Church's teaching on the fundamental right to life to illustrate how a Catholic should not be selective to Church teaching. The Church consistently teaches that God is the giver of life and only God can take life. Thus, no human being, or human institution has any right to take life. The Church interprets to the letter the commandment, "Thou shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13). Be that as it may, the Catholic Church stands in defense of human life from conception till natural death. It is incumbent on all Catholics to embrace the pro-life stance of the Church in all its ramifications. It requires courage as a Catholic to bear witness to the Church's teaching on pro-life in an increasingly secular society where people assert their right to take their own lives if they find it no longer meaningful. People also feel they have a right to abort a child;

they label it as pro-choice. Catholics should be bold and courageous to defend weak and defenseless human beings: the unborn, the elderly, physically challenged persons, the poor, destitute, immigrants, etc.

The Catholic Church's teaching on pro-life should be embraced in all its ramifications. The Catholic should protect and defend human life from conception till natural death. Thus, Catholics should not only stand against abortion but should provide moral and spiritual support to pregnant mothers who decide to keep their babies, especially those outside wedlock. As Catholics, we should bear witness to life in all its ramifications: defending and protecting the unborn child, supporting those pregnant outside wedlock especially teenagers, care of the elderly and physically challenged, and standing up against the death penalty.

The Catholic Church that defends the unborn child also stands against the death penalty. The Church teaches that as Catholics we should have respect for every life, "even that of criminals and unjust aggressors" (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 57). As a Catholic I should be courageous enough to stand up against abortion and the death penalty. I cannot be pro-life and support the death penalty. The State has no right to take human life. Pope Saint John Paul II made it very clear in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, (issued on March 25, 1995) which means *The Gospel of Life*, the inviolability of human life. Pope John Paul II argued that the offender may not be executed except in absolute necessity when society cannot be defended from an offender. But Pope Saint Paul II quickly added: "Today however, as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically non-existent" (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 56).

Conclusion

Witness to Catholicism is for life. As Catholics, we should be proud of our faith and be eager to bear witness to it in the secular order despite its numerous challenges and difficulties. We should also be ready to practice our faith and die for it. Let us be filled with gratitude to God for our Catholic faith. Let us boldly say, 'thank you Lord for making me a Catholic.' Let us be proud of our faith and cherish it all the days of our lives. Let us continually strive to grow in our faith, to know our faith and to joyfully practice it. As Catholics, let us heed the words of St. Peter, "do not be intimidated" (1 Peter 3:15). Let us be zealous for Christ; let us be zealous for the faith. With the grace of God, let us resolve to live as Catholics and to die as Catholics.

Thank you for listening and God bless you.

- Being a talk delivered at St. Michael's Catholic Church, 100 Oak Drive South, Lake Jackson, Texas, 77566, USA, on Sunday, August 6, 2017.