

*Homily for the Mass
Catholics @ The Capitol
February 6, 2012
Capital Plaza Hotel
Frankfort, Kentucky*

The Gospel proclamation that we were just privileged to hear narrates the final scene in St. Matthew's account of the Good News. Chapter 28 brings the story of the Christ to full circle. The story began in Galilee where Jesus grew to manhood, where the first apostles were recruited, where the presence of the kingdom was first announced. Now the final scene of the Gospel unfolds in Galilee on a mountain.

The Evangelist Matthew includes an intriguing detail that could very easily escape our notice in hearing this passage. After the Risen Jesus joins his friends on the Galilean mountain, Matthew informs us that the apostles "worshiped him but they doubted." (MT 28:17)

By telling us that the disciples worshiped the Risen Jesus, Matthew is testifying to the divinity of Jesus. Worship is accorded to God and to God alone. Therefore, in some measure the disciples understood that their Master, their Teacher and Lord, was indeed divine and they comprehended this sufficiently enough to give Him what belongs only to God. However, we should all be intrigued, I think, by the end of that verse. Matthew tells us "**but they doubted.**"

Exactly what did they doubt? They could not have doubted that Jesus had been raised from the dead. This had to be patently clear to them. They had experienced His risen presence throughout the forty days from Easter to this day, the day of His Ascension. How could they possibly have doubted that He was raised and that He was divine, since they worshiped Him? I'd like you to consider with me that what they doubted had nothing to do with Jesus but rather their doubt was all about themselves. They doubted their ability to be faithful disciples. They were well aware of their powerlessness and self-centered concerns when they abandoned Him during His trial and passion. I believe that they doubted whether they could be His disciples and His apostles. I believe they doubted whether they were actually capable of obeying and following the words and example of the Risen Lord. This, I think, is what caused them to doubt.

If you accept this as the basis of their doubt, then what follows makes eminent sense. Jesus responds by declaring to them His solemn, universal authority. He tells them: "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me." If we are careful readers of the Scriptures, we cannot help but think of the beginning of the Gospels where Jesus is tempted in the desert wilderness. During those 40 days, the Satan tempted Jesus with the deception that he – the devil - had ultimate authority over the nations of the world. Now Jesus without reservation or qualification declares that He alone possesses that universal authority. Satan's offer in the desert was hollow. It was a lie. The devil had lost the battle in the desert and now with the Resurrection he has lost the war.

By assuring His apostles of His universal, divine authority, Jesus intends to bolster their confidence. They do not have to rely on their own strength. They are not left to their own devices as they were at His passion or to their own ingenuity or to their natural, human courage in order to accomplish the mission entrusted to them.

Having declared His universal authority, Jesus then commissions His doubting friends to go to all the nations and make disciples. Evangelization is no longer restricted to the House of Israel. The Good News is no longer the domain of one people or targeted at one particular geography. The entire world, every nation, every society and societies' structures is now their mission field.

As we gather here in Frankfort for our “Catholics @ The Capitol” program, it would be good for us to ask what exactly does it mean to be a disciple and what does it mean to make disciples.

Once again the Gospels and 2000 years of lived Christianity give us our answer. A disciple is one who listens to the Living Word of Jesus Christ. A disciple is one who lives earnestly according to that Word. A disciple is one who lives in intimate communion of life with the Risen Jesus and with His Body, the Church. A disciple, like the Master, is willing to do, indeed realizes he or she **must** do, whatever pleases the Father. Thus, discipleship is a total way of life. It demands a commitment to Christ and to His Gospel, to the Church and to its teachings which results in a consistent, holy pattern of life as we go through our daily actions and decisions. In the Church we enjoy, as well, the benefit of our elder sisters and brothers whom we call “Saints” who stand out for us as heroic models of discipleship throughout the Christian centuries.

Today on the church's universal calendar, we observe the Memorial of 26 heroic martyrs: some priests, some religious brothers and others laity. Faithful to the Lord's commission given on the mountain in Galilee, they had been spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ in Japan – homeland to a number of them, when a fierce persecution broke out against Catholics. This governmental denial of religious freedom was the result of an intense animosity toward anything European as relations between Japan and Europe grew increasingly hostile. Christianity was identified as a European movement and the Shogun in control at the time wanted to purify Japan of anything European. Father Paul Miki, a Jesuit priest, and his 25 martyr companions followed in the footsteps of our Savior. They were mocked, tortured and crucified at Nagasaki in 1597.

Celebrating the feast of martyrs reminds us that Christians from the beginning and in every age have been called to give witness to Christ and His Gospel no matter what the cost, even to the price of death. As I am sure you know, the word **martyr** stems from the Greek word that has the broader meaning of **witness**. From the beginning some disciples and apostles of Christ have been called to give the greatest, most heroic witness by willingly accepting death. Martyrdom allows disciples to conform totally to the Lord – to the Lord who showed His love by willingly laying down His life for the salvation of the world.

Consider this though. The vocation that is given to a few – to let go of one's very life for the faith – is in a different but similar way asked of us all who would be disciples and apostles of Christ. By virtue of our Baptism and cooperating with the graces and strength given us through the sacraments of the Church, we need to be prepared to confess Christ before humanity. Persecution comes in many forms and has never been lacking in the history of the church nor is it lacking today.

Within this Scriptural and historical context, we can reflect now on the fundamental purpose that gathers us as Catholics in Frankfort. It is a requirement of our faith – a fundamental part of the mission that has been handed on to us – to fulfill our obligation of assisting in the development of our society and its public affairs. Pope Benedict XVI uses a handy phrase to describe this. He calls our obligation to influence the moral character of society, “social charity.” We all are well aware of our obligation to love our neighbor. This phrase “social charity” reminds us of our obligation to love our neighbors in their communal lives, to serve our society and its structures, its laws and its regulations by bringing the love of Christ to bear on those human institutions for the betterment of society and the good of every human person.

If such an obligation exists on the part of the Church, then the corresponding obligation must exist and must be recognized on the part of civil government to allow the Church to fulfill its duty. Civil law and civil structures should recognize and protect the Church's right and obligation to participate in society without expecting us or forcing us to abandon or compromise our fundamental moral convictions. If we have an obligation to teach and give witness to the moral values that should shape our lives and inspire our society, then there is a corresponding obligation

that we be allowed to follow and express freely those religious values. Anything short of government protection of that freedom represents an unwarranted threat of government interference.

I pray that our gathering will renew and strengthen our conviction that the Church does, indeed, have precious assets that are important to this Commonwealth, to every state, to our nation and to our world. Drawn from God's Word, the natural law, divine law and the social teaching of our Church, we bring a consistent moral framework to enrich public policy, the laws and the regulations of our land. We bring a consistent moral and ethical framework that allows us to examine, critique and then affirm or oppose proposed legislation and public policy issues, not from a political or partisan agenda, but from an agenda firmly rooted on the sacredness of human life, the dignity of each human person and the debt of justice owed to individuals, communities, agencies and institutions.

This is a period in our history where you and I cannot afford to doubt the vocation we have received nor dare we doubt our capacity aided by grace to fulfill it faithfully. This is a period in our history where you and I must rely confidently and totally on the authority of Christ at work in us, the Church. This is a period in our history where we are called to give clear and even heroic witness to the precious assets which the Gospel can bring to the public square, to public issues and policies.

In recent weeks, I have been noticing a common trend in some sectors of the Catholic news services. Since the close of the Second Vatican Council, it has been commonplace for media, Catholic and secular media, to accentuate divisions within the Church. It is now common parlance to speak of the Catholic left and the Catholic right, the conservative Catholics and the liberal Catholics. In the shocking aftermath of recent and unprecedented attacks on religious freedom in our nation, media are now reporting that after five decades of in-house bickering, there is clear evidence that the divisions within the church are joining forces on at least one issue. Secular and Catholic media alike, report that a wide cross-section of Catholics are united in opposition to the January 20 ruling issued by the Federal Department of Health and Human Services. Right and left, conservative and liberal, all seem to agree that this sweeping mandate encroaches on the Church's legitimate prerogatives, that is, the Church's right to operate its agencies and pursue employment policies that reflect its moral and ethical values. Any government effort to curtail that freedom is an offense that must be opposed.

There is no one who doubts the need in society for our charitable agencies and institutions serving the poor, the sick and people in every sort of need – institutions built with great cost and sacrifice over many years. In the present climate, it's not that there is no longer any need for these but increasingly it appears that there is no room for them – we are not welcome to provide our needed services according to our own religious and moral values. This is a time in our history when the courageous voice of Christ's disciples and apostles must be raised in protest.

As you know, this fall we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican Council II and Pope Benedict has declared that the universal church should observe "A Year of Faith" to mark the beginning of the historical Ecumenical Council of the mid-twentieth century. On the day the Council closed, December 8, 1965, a series of speeches was given to select groups of people in the world, urging them to consider the Church's teachings articulated in the conciliar documents. After Pope Paul VI's closing address, several prominent Cardinals of the day addressed speeches to the world's youth, to the poor, to artists, to scientists, and one addressed "To Rulers". Today I suspect it would be entitled "To those in government". I'd like to conclude by quoting a small section of the French Cardinal Achille Leinart's speech. The words are as timely, the concerns are as crucial today as they were 50 years ago when first spoken. In 1965 I very much doubt that the Cardinal would have had the United States in mind when he cautioned about the rights of the Church to teach and work freely in society. I imagine though that, if he were giving the speech in 2012, our nation whose charism among the nations of the world has been religious freedom would be very much on the Cardinal's mind when he delivered these words:

“... we respect your office, we recognize your just laws, we esteem those who make them and those who apply them. But we have a sacrosanct word to speak to you and it is this: Only God is great. God alone is the beginning and the end. God alone is the source of your authority and the foundation of your laws.

Your task is to be the promoters of order and peace among men in the world. But never forget this: It is God, the living and true God, who is the Father of men. And it is Christ, His eternal Son, who came to make this known to us and to teach us that we are all brothers. He it is who is the great artisan of order and peace on earth ...

And what does this Church ask of you ... the powers of the earth? ... she asks of you only liberty, the liberty to believe and to preach her faith, the freedom to love her God and serve Him, the freedom to live and to bring to men her message of life. Do not fear her. She is made after the image of her Master, whose mysterious action does not interfere with your prerogatives but heals everything human of its fatal weakness, transfigures it and fills it with hope, truth and beauty.

Allow Christ to exercise His purifying action on society. Do not crucify Him anew. ... allow us to spread everywhere without hindrance the Gospel of peace on which we have meditated during this council. Of it, your peoples will be the first beneficiaries, since the Church forms for you loyal citizens, friends of social peace and progress.”

Bishop Ronald Gainer
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