

Truth is Truth

His Eminence, John Cardinal O'Connor

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TRUTH IS TRUTH

JOHN CARDINAL O'CONNOR*

It is incumbent upon me to comment on a statement that was published by the press and released by Dr. Joaquin Novarro-Valls, the public information authority for the Holy See in Rome. It addressed the question of so-called "partial-birth abortion."¹ The press attacked our Holy Father for what they view as an intrusion by the Church into matters the press alleged pertain only to the state. Yet, for almost 2,000 years, the Church has addressed issues of public policy; those things that affect all people, including Catholics. Although addressing the subject of public policy has nothing to do with political campaigns, there are some in political office, and others, who very quickly denounce the Holy See, and specifically our Holy Father, for "meddling" in the politics of the United States. This is to be expected, however, it is a not-so-clever way of trying to muzzle the Church.

If the Church here in New York, the Church in Rome, or anywhere else were to refrain from addressing crucial moral di-

* This article is derived from a homily given by His Eminence, the Archbishop of New York, at Sunday Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York, on April 21, 1996. The original text of the homily was published in CATHOLIC NEW YORK, April 25, 1996, at 13.

¹ The statement, which was issued on Friday, April 19, 1996, following President Clinton's veto of a bill designed to ban a late-term partial-birth abortion procedure, stated that the President's decision was "a shameful veto that in practice [was] equivalent to an incredibly brutal act of aggression against innocent human life and against the inalienable human rights of the unborn." See *Abortion Bill's Veto Assailed by Vatican*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 21, 1996 at Sec. 1, p. 35. In response to criticism that the Roman Catholic Church was attempting to influence the upcoming United States presidential election, Dr. Novarro-Valls said, "Anytime we express a view it is always on moral grounds, not political ones." See *Vatican Assails Late-Term Abortion*, TIMES UNION (Albany, N.Y.), Apr. 20, 1996 at B11. (Footnote added by THE CATHOLIC LAWYER).

mensions of public policy simply because an election campaign is being waged anywhere, then the Church would *never* be able to speak. There is always an election going on somewhere in the world, and certainly here, in the United States, an election campaign is being waged at virtually every moment. At a future date, this city will see the election campaign for the mayoralty. This state will see an election campaign for the governorship. There will be, of course, more immediately, an election campaign for the presidency.

If there are those who choose to believe that our Holy Father is trying to determine the outcome of a presidential election, or any other, that is their right in a free country. Nevertheless, the Church will not be silenced simply because of an election. The Holy Roman Catholic Church and our Holy Father will do exactly what St. Paul directed be done: preach the faith when convenient, when inconvenient, in season and out of season, no matter what else is going on.

Finding Truth Through Living and Expressing the Teachings of Jesus

In our Lord's day, what is now called the Holy Land was divided into three areas: Galilee, Judea, and Samaria.² In Samaria, in about the year 100, there was born one of the most fascinating saints in the entire history of the Church, St. Justin Martyr. St. Justin is a very important saint because, as the first Christian philosopher, he was the one who bridged a gap between reason and faith, always arguing that the two should coincide.

We are told that Justin Martyr was born in Samaria of Greco-Roman parents and that he grew up as a pagan. He studied the pagan philosophers, particularly Plato.

Then, something happened that changed his life. He tells us himself that he was walking along one day when he met a man who told him that he looked very preoccupied. Justin Martyr

² Christ Himself was usually referred to as a Galilean—that was where Christ grew up as a boy, that is where He did His teaching and preaching, although born, as we know, in Bethlehem in Judea. Galilee was to the north.

Samaria was the area of conflict between the Jews and the people called Samaritans, who had very serious doctrinal differences with one another. It was in Samaria that one of our Lord's great conversations took place with the Samaritan woman whom He had asked for a cup of cold water. Christ offered her, in exchange, the waters of life.

told the man that he was reflecting on the wisdom of the philosopher Plato, and believed that by reading and studying Plato assiduously, he would find the one true God.

We are told that this man said to Justin Martyr, "No. You will not find God simply by way of the Greek philosophers. Let me tell you about the writings of the prophets." The man then went on to discuss all of the prophets from Moses onward. Justin Martyr describes this scene by saying that, at the conclusion, the man left him, but his heart was burning within him. As a result of this, and as the result of something additional, Justin Martyr became a convert in the year 130.

But what was that something additional? Justin Martyr watched the Christians suffer. He recognized how they loved one another; how they loved God; how they refused to be dissuaded by tortures or threats; how they held fast to the *truth* as they understood it; how the emperor himself, Marcus Aurelius, was unable, by any threats, to keep them from *living and expressing the teachings of Jesus*. This courage is the wonderful forerunner of today's Church and today's Holy Father, who will not be dissuaded from speaking the truth. For these two reasons, hearing about the Sacred Scriptures and watching the Christians in action, Justin became a convert who taught the Greek philosophers, but now in the new light of Christianity, and most particularly, became the great educator on the Holy Eucharist.

The major work called "The Apology of St. Justin Martyr," gives us but some of the things that he has to say about the Holy Eucharist. He talks first about baptism and then how, after baptism, people are admitted into the Eucharistic sacrifice. He says:

After baptizing one who has believed and given assent, we escort that person to the place where are assembled those whom we call brethren, to offer up sincere prayers in common for ourselves, for the baptized person, and for all other persons wherever they may be, in order that, since we have found the truth, we may be deemed fit through our actions to be esteemed as good citizens and observers of the law, and thus attain eternal salvation. At the conclusion of the prayers we greet one another with a kiss [the kiss of peace]. Then, bread and a chalice containing wine mixed with water are presented to the one presiding over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of all, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and he recites lengthy prayers of thanksgiving

to God in the name of those to whom He granted such favors. At the end of these prayers and thanksgiving, all present express their approval by saying 'Amen.' This Hebrew word, 'Amen,' means 'So be it.' And when he who presides has celebrated the Eucharist, they whom we call deacons permit each one present to partake of the Eucharistic bread, and wine and water; and they carry it also to the absentees.

We call this food the Eucharist, of which only he can partake who has acknowledged the truth of our teachings, who has been cleansed by baptism for the remission of his sins and for his regeneration, and who regulates his life upon the principles laid down by Christ. Not as ordinary bread nor as ordinary drink do we partake of them, but just as, through the word of God, our Savior Jesus Christ, became Incarnate and took upon Himself flesh and blood for our salvation, so, we have been taught, the food which has been made the Eucharist by the prayer of His word, and which nourishes our flesh and blood by assimilation, is both the flesh and blood of that Jesus who is made flesh. The Apostles in their memoirs, which are called Gospels, have handed down what Jesus ordered them to do: that He took bread and, after giving thanks, said, 'Do this in remembrance of Me; this is My body.' In like manner, He took also the chalice, gave thanks and said: 'This is My blood'; and to them only did He give it.

Recognizing Jesus in the Breaking of the Bread

It is the Easter Season until Pentecost Sunday. Yet, are we, who are expected to believe in the reality of the Resurrection of Christ, to have only the word of the Scriptures? Is this to be something simply historical for us? Some of the Apostles, some of the women who had immediately associated with Jesus, saw Him in the flesh after He rose from the dead. What about the hundreds of thousands, the millions, who, in the course of time, would become baptized Christians? Must we wait until our eternal salvation, until we are in glory with Almighty God in heaven before we can hope to see the Jesus risen from the dead; the Jesus born in the manger; the Jesus who walked the hills of Galilee; the Jesus who talked with the Samaritan woman; the Jesus who suffered and died? Not at all.

In the beautiful Gospel, Luke 24:13-35, we find a man named Cleopas and a companion who were not immediate Apostles of Christ, but were followers of Christ, walking dejectedly

some seven miles from Jerusalem, to the little town called Emmaus.³ They were despondent. They had been told, by what they called "some foolish women," that Jesus had risen from the dead, but they simply did not believe it. That, for them, was heresy. They had seen Jesus' miracles; they had seen all sorts of wondrous works; they had almost certainly seen Him crucified. There was no question in their mind that He was dead. Now along come these women who had gone to the grave and found an empty tomb. All their hopes were shattered.

The mind-set of these two followers on their way to Emmaus was that the women created a living Christ out of their emotional desire to see Him. Then, just as to Justin Martyr, there appeared a man who asked them, "What are you pondering? Why do you look so sad?"

They asked Him, "Are you a stranger? Are you the only one who does not know what has happened?"

"Tell me what has happened," said the stranger.

They did not recognize Him any more than Justin Martyr recognized this strange man who appeared and disappeared.

Instead of identifying Himself, he talked to them about the Scriptures. This is why I told the story from Justin Martyr. As He talked about all that had happened and about the prophets, Moses and the others, we are told "their hearts began to burn within them," just as Justin Martyr's heart burned within him when he was told by a strange man about the Scriptures, the Scriptures that prophesized everything that was going to happen. As their hearts began to burn within them, they still did not recognize this stranger. This was a wondrous story and it filled them with longing, such that their hearts were burning, yet, they did not recognize Jesus.

Then, they reached this little town of Emmaus. The disciples were going to stay there for the night and they asked Jesus to stay with them because He had pretended that He was going to continue walking down the road.

When Jesus went in, everything changed. He was their guest who immediately became their host. It was the role of the host to break bread and distribute it, and it was this stranger who broke bread and gave it to them and told them to eat. Then,

³ We are not even certain where Emmaus is, but it is approximately seven miles from Jerusalem.

He disappeared from their sight. Only *then*, did they recognize that it was Jesus, the risen Lord—at the moment of the breaking of the bread!

This Gospel is a tremendously important Gospel, uniquely important, in all of the Scriptures. This is the first recorded time that the Eucharistic sacrifice takes place after the Last Supper and the crucifixion of Christ. We are told, “They recognized Him in the breaking of the bread.” They saw the risen Jesus in the breaking of the bread. That was the way it was to be for the rest of time. Jesus was not depriving us of being able to see Him. We are to see Him in the breaking of the bread.

This is what happened at the Last Supper. He broke the bread in this fashion and gave it to His followers. In the inn at Emmaus, He broke the bread and gave it to His disciples. This we could call the first Mass offered after the Last Supper and the crucifixion. This is why Justin Martyr is so important; he describes very specifically how the Eucharistic sacrifice was carried out in the early days and how uniquely important it was to Christians. Everything revolved around the Mass. Baptism took place in conjunction with the Mass. The Mass became instantly the heart and soul of the faith of the early Christian people. This is the story we are told at Emmaus. This is why, then, we are told that these disciples so excitedly rushed back those seven miles to Jerusalem to tell the others the good news, not simply that they had seen Jesus, but that they had seen Him *in the breaking of the bread*.

This is what is offered to us in this Eucharistic sacrifice today—to see Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Those disciples invited Him into the inn, so He came into their very beings. We must open our hearts and we must believe. We cannot just routinely approach the altar rail to receive what, for all practical purposes, looks like a piece of bread and tastes like a piece of bread. We must open our minds, our hearts, our very beings. We must invite Jesus in. We have to say, “Come, Lord Jesus, I believe.” And then we will see Him.

When the priest says, “This is My body. This is My blood,” if we open our minds and our hearts, we will see the crucified and risen Jesus. He demands our full, entire attention. We are doing precisely, here today, in this year of our Lord 1996, what those early Christians did.

In further passages, Justin Martyr goes on to describe that

everything was done initially for the entire community on Sunday because this was the day of the Resurrection. He says, "We all come together and we pray together." We *pray* together. We just do not sit together. We just do not let our minds wander together. We *pray* together. When the Eucharistic sacrifice is offered, we sing together "Amen." "So be it." And we see Christ together, we see Him in the breaking of the bread.

But there was that one further reason why Justin converted from paganism to Christianity—the lives of the Christians. They believed the truth, so they tried to live the truth. They tried to treat one another outside the assembly the same way they treated one another inside—not only one another, but all people. They were not afraid to sacrifice for their faith. They were not afraid to speak the truth at all times regardless of allegations of being political or anything else. The truth is truth; life is life; death is death—no matter who is running for public office. That truth must resound throughout our land and throughout the world. But it can resound only through the lives of Christians, not by my voice, or any other voice alone from a pulpit, not by something that we read in books, not even the Scriptures. No one believes simply on the basis of what is read or what is heard. People believe on the basis of what is *lived*, in your life and in my life. St. Justin was to die for his beliefs; he became a martyr by defending the right of Christians to teach and practice what Christ taught and practiced. If Christians see that we live the crucified and risen Christ in our lives, if pagans, if we can call them such, see this, then the whole world will come to recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread.

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