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Wilbur Mills was a long-time speaker in the House and a one-time candidate. Mills was involved in a traffic incident in Washington, DC in 1974 when I was a young priest working there. His car was stopped by US Park Police late at night because the driver turned out the lights. Mills was intoxicated and his face was injured from a scuffle with Annabella Battistella, professionally known as Fannie Fox, the Argentine firecracker. In an attempt to escape, they leapt from the car and jumped into the nearby Tidal Basin. One month later, Mills was to be on the ballot in his home state of Arkansas for re-election to the Congress. While his office denied that he had a drinking problem, Jack Anderson reported that if his staff said, "He can't speak with you now, he's on the floor", it was never clear if Mills was on the floor of the House or the floor of his office. In the next election, a month after the scandal, the Mill challenger used the slogan: "If you like liquor, sex and thrills, cast your vote for Wilbur Mills." Mills won handily with 60% of the votes. He had asked for forgiveness from his constituencies and explained to them that his problems were a result of cavorting with foreigners.

For 20 years I was here in Washington cavorting with foreigners working at the Spanish Catholic Center. I did not find this to be a corrupting influence on my life, but rather an uplifting experience and indeed a great privilege. Coming from a lace curtain Irish community in the Midwest, being thrust into the challenges and sufferings of the immigrant community was truly an eye-opener.

Shortly after arriving at the Centro Catolico, I was visited by a man who was obviously a campesino from El Salvador who sat across from me at my desk and broke down and wept bitterly. He was so overcome with grief that he could not speak, he simply handed me a letter from his wife back in El Salvador who remonstrated him for having abandoned her and their six children to penury and starvation. When the man was able to compose himself, he explained to me that he came to Washington, like so many, because with the war raging in his country it was impossible to sustain his family by farming. So a coyote brought him to Washington where he shared a room with several other men in similar circumstances. He washed dishes in two restaurants, one at lunchtime and one at dinnertime. He ate the leftover food on the dirty plates so as to save money. He walked to work so as not to spend any money on transportation, so that he could send all the money he earned back to his family. He said he sent money each week, but

now after six months, his wife had not received a single letter from him and accused him of abandoning her and the children. I asked him if he sent check or money orders. He told me that he sent cash. He said: “Each week I put all the money I earn into an envelope with the amount of stamps that I was told and I put it in that blue mailbox on the corner.” I looked out the window and I could see the blue mailbox, the problem was it was not a mailbox at all, but a fancy trash bin. That encounter certainly brought home to me how difficult it is to be an immigrant, to be a stranger in a strange land and experience countless humiliations and deprivations as one struggled to make enough money to feed one’s children.

Nor was it just the undocumented workers who were suffering in their new surroundings. Another very important demographic that we served at the Spanish Catholic Center where the many domestic workers would come to Washington to work as servants for diplomats and international employees of the embassies, Inter-American Development Bank, World Bank, Inter-American Defense Board, Organization of American states and the many other international bodies that were entitled to grant diplomatic visas for household workers. In many cases it was just an exercise in human trafficking. Many women were exploited economically and sexually. Often their passports were held by the employers to keep them from leaving. Whenever I would meet with these diplomats, I would be told: “Padre, somos muy católicos,” and “La tratamos como un miembro de nuestra familia.” To which I would always respond: “I’m so glad I’m not a member of your family.” Then of course, they would tell me what they thought of my ancestors and that I was a communist.

Those were very interesting days to be a Catholic and to be in Washington DC. There was an active Catholic Worker group here, Nellie Gray was organizing the March for Life, there were many organizations with outreach to Latin America, the peace movement was flourishing. There was a strong alliance with Rev. Martin Luther King’s struggle for racial justice, and there was great interest in the social Gospel of the Church. It seems like a long time ago.

I am very happy to be part of this conference here today. First of all, it gives me an opportunity as a Bishop to thank all of you who are involved in promoting the social gospel of the Church in our day. I am pleased that Bishop Blair and others in the conference are working so diligently to bring together those who are involved in the pro-life movement and in the social justice ministry of the Church. Both of these important expressions of our Catholic faith are a constituent part of evangelization.

The Gospel of Life is so basic to the social teaching of the Church. As Pope Benedict puts it so well: “Openness to life is at the center of true development. When a society moves toward the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man’s true good. If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away. The acceptance of life strengthens moral fiber and makes people capable of mutual help. By cultivating openness to life, wealthy people can better understand the needs of the poor; they can avoid huge economic and intellectual resources to satisfy the selfish desires of their own citizens, and instead, they can promote virtuous action within the perspective that is morally sound and marked by solidarity, respecting the fundamental right to life of every people and every individual.”

When I was in the seminary, our Provincial, Father Victor, wrote a letter to Rome in which he said that our mission in Puerto Rico was flourishing and that our Province was prepared to take on a second mission. He said that he wanted the most difficult mission in the world. The response was lightening quick, saying that we should open a mission in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. The Guardian, Father Fermin Schmidt, from the Capuchin College in Washington, was named the first Bishop and friars were sent. Eventually, three of my classmates went. It was reported back to us that when the friars landed in a field, the natives who had never seen Europeans or an airplane were curious. They asked if the plane was male or female. They said if it was a female they wanted an egg.

Many years later, a young friar I ordained who was working in Papua New Guinea came to see me on his home visit. He had glorious pictures of smiling natives, with bones in their noses, feathers in their hair and little else in the way of clothing. He announced proudly, “This is my parish council.” I was particularly intrigued because one of my own pastors had just told me that his parishioners were not ready for a parish council. If Fr. Provincial wrote today asking for the most difficult mission, we might have been sent not to Papua, New Guinea, but to the US.

In the same vein, at World Youth Day in Cologne, Pope Benedict addressed the Bishops of Germany at the seminary. He referred to his native country, Germany “as a mission land.”

This is true for so many places in the Western World where secularism and dechristianization are gaining ground.

We need to find new ways of bringing the Gospel to the contemporary world, of proclaiming Christ anew and of implanting the faith. As Pope Benedict said, “We are not here just for the “existing flock.” We must be a missionary Church.”

Our task is to turn consumers into disciples and disciple-makers. We need to prepare men and women who witness to the faith, and not send people into the witness protection program. As the U.S. Bishops wrote in *Go Make Disciples*: “Every Catholic can be a minister of welcome, reconciliation, and understanding to those who have stopped practicing the faith.”

In the new millennium, business as usual is not enough. We must be a team of missionaries, moving from a maintenance mode to a missionary one. We must ask ourselves, “What does it mean to live in a culture of unbelief; a culture which does not even know it does not believe because it still lives on the residue of Christian civilization?” As Hauerwas has expressed it so well: “The Church exists today as resident aliens, an adventurous colony in a society of unbelief. As a society of unbelief, Western culture is devoid of the sense of journey, of adventure, because it lacks belief in much more than the cultivation of an ever shrinking horizon of self-preservation and self-expression.”

To be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ in the Catholic Church is much more than a head trip. It is a way of life together; the whole person is engaged in the process. Education for this journey must therefore be experiential, personal, engaging and life-giving. We learn discipleship the way we learn a language, by being part of a community that speaks that language. Our young Catholics must be mentored in the faith by others, either peers or older Catholics who are walking the walk.

The mission of the Church is about making disciples, helping people respond to the call to holiness by being part of a faith-filled, worshipping community struggling to be faithful to the

Gospel. Discipleship is about living with Christ, in a faith community striving to model our lives on His teaching and example and then to pass on the faith.

This is not something new in the history of the Church. We have been doing this for two thousand years. One of the first attempts is documented in a stunning book that comes to us from the first century. It is called the Didache which means “training.” It is the first training manual for initiating people into the life of the Church. It was memorized by the mentors or teachers who used it as a lesson plan, catechism, liturgical worship aide and a primer for faithful discipleship. The Didache described the step-by-step transformation by which converts were to be prepared for a full active participation in the life of the Church. As Milarec says in his commentary on this remarkable document: “Any community that cannot artfully and effectively pass on its cherished way of life as a program for divine wisdom and graced existence, cannot long endure. Any way of life that cannot be clearly specified, exhibited and differentiated from the alternative modes operative within the surrounding culture is doomed to growing insignificance and gradual assimilation.”

The Didache shows us that for the Church teaching the faith is always a process of mentoring. Then as now, we are not transmitting our own theories or notions, but speaking and hopefully witnessing the word of God; the word of life is not to be received as mere information. The mentor was expected to illustrate, inquire, question, listen and challenge his candidate in such ways that not only the words, but the deeper meaning of the Way of Life were being suitably assimilated at every step. The Didache also tries to prepare its novices for the rejection by their friends, relatives and even by the dominant culture which is hostile to the Gospel teachings.

Another early writing that has always fascinated me is the Letter to Diognetus where the author is describing to his friend what Christians are like: He says that they live in the same neighborhoods, speak the same language, dress like everybody else; but they do not kill their babies and they respect the marriage bond. Very quaint indeed. It is a little scary to think that the Diognetus letter could have been written last week.

In today’s world Catholic education must be Didache, training in a way of life which is increasingly alien in the secular world, where our concern about unborn children or the sacredness of marriage makes us appear quaint and even nettlesome. We need mentors: parents,

grandparents, Godparents, teachers, youth ministers, neighbors, who are ready to pass on the faith.

As a young priest, I was present at the Puebla Conference. It was Pope John Paul II's first trip after being elected Pope. As the Pope's plane landed in Mexico City, all the church bells in the country rang out with joy. The successor of Saint Peter was here in our midst. The crowd extended along the highway from Mexico City to Puebla. People had come the day before and slept on the highway. It reminded me of the Acts of the Apostles where Luke describes how the people put the sick by the side of the road so that Peter's shadow would touch them.

The crowd, comprised of millions of Mexicans, extended over the 60 mile highway connecting Mexico City and Puebla. The government had tried to discourage people from going. The word was "watch the Pope on television." Nobody paid any attention to that plea, but afterwards the government officials reported that there were no troublesome incidences due to the crowds as they had feared. Indeed the crime rate fell to an all time low while the Pope was in the country. The government speculated that even the burglars and pickpockets went for the Pope's blessing.

The Holy Father upon arriving in Puebla got out of the open car, walked across the soccer field to the makeshift altar and celebrated the opening Mass of the Puebla Conference. I shall never forget his homily. He challenged us to be teachers and to teach the truth about Christ, about the Church, about the human person.

The same message is as crucial to us today. The content of our teaching must embrace all these truths. The truth about Christ: The Son of the Father, true God and true man, our Crucified Redeemer, our Risen Lord who has promised to be with us always and who establishes his Church on the rock of Peter.

The truth about the Church: founded by Jesus on the apostles, guided by the Holy Spirit, gathering God's people around the altar, calling people to discipleship, conversion and ministry; a Church teaching with authority, witnessing to the presence of the Risen Lord, service Christ especially in the poor and downtrodden.

The truth about the human person; that each one is an irreplaceable mystery made in God's image and likeness called to an eternal destiny. The Church's teachings on human rights, Gospel of Life, sexual morality and social justice are all corollaries of this great truth about our origins and our destiny.

The Church's medical ethics, service to the poor, sick and infirmed, the works of mercy and social services, and the promotion of a more just society are all interconnected and crucial in our task of passing on the Faith and building a civilization of love.

The amazing thing is that historically the Church was persecuted mostly for the truths that we talked about; Christ and the Church. The controversies were Arianism, transubstantiation or papal infallibility. Today, the attacks directed at the Church are directed at our teaching concerning the dignity of the human person, the sacredness of life, the importance of marriage, and all the prerogatives that flow from being made in the image and likeness of God, placed on this earth to build a civilization of love. The Church's commitment to teach the social Gospel and promote human development flows from our duty to proclaim the truth about the human person.

In his Encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict addresses the problems of global development and progress toward the common Good, arguing that both Love and Truth are essential elements of an effective response.

Justice is inseparable from charity. On the one hand charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples... On the other hand charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving. The earthly city is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an ever greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion. Charity always manifests God's love in human relationships as well; it gives theological and salvific value to all commitment for justice in the world.

Our striving for the common good in society is simply a logical corollary of our love of neighbor. Unjust structures and oppressive political and economic systems result when ethics and virtue are lavished from the public square as irrelevant to building a just and humane society. As Pope Benedict has stated, "The sharing of goods and resources from which authentic

development proceeds is not guaranteed by merely technical progress and relationships of utility, but by the potential of love that overcomes evil with good, opening up the path towards reciprocity of consciences and liberties.”

When Pope John Paul II visited Madrid in 2003, addressing one million young people, he told them: “Respond to the blind violence and inhuman hatred with the fascinating power of love.” We all know that evil has its fascination and attraction, but too often we lose sight of the fact that love and goodness also have the power to attract and that virtue is winsome. Passing on the faith means helping people to have a real relationship with Christ that will equip them to lead a good life, a moral life, a just life. Thus part of our job as teachers of the faith is to help our people become virtuous. Plato thought that virtue was knowledge. As Chaim Ginott, the concentration camp survivor reminds us, doctors, nurses, scientists and soldiers were part of Holocaust machinery, showing that knowledge is not virtue, and often science and technology have been put at the service of evil.

Peter Kreeft has said that in our contemporary society we have reduced all virtue to one; being nice. Kreeft laments that for the first time in history, moral relativism and subjectivism are not an aberration of rebels, but the reigning orthodoxy of the intellectual establishment. So often university academes and those in the media reject any belief in a universal and objective morality. And in our public schools values clarification based on a moral ping pong of preferences and discussion serves us “values” that are often more about feelings and calculations rather than about truths and principles.

We need to equip our people to be disciples. They need to know the truths of our faith, but they need to know how to live those truths. The way most of us become real Christians is by looking over someone else’s shoulder, emulating some admired older member of our family or parish, saying yes and taking up a way of life that was made real and accessible through the witness of someone else. Young Christians need mentors, just as the Didache called for mentors to accompany the neophytes of the early Church.

We live in a world obsessed by celebrities. Celebrities have replaced heroes and heroines for our young people. Often times these celebrities, for all good looks, talents in singing, acting or sports lead lives that are superficial, self-absorbed and chaotic.

The Church has always held up for us the lives of the saints; they provide examples of the universal call to holiness. The Saints model for us the struggle to overcome human weakness and sinfulness and embrace God's will in our lives.

In the life of Dorothy Day, we read how as a child, she experienced a terrible earthquake in her town in California. People were forced to live in tents for weeks because of the destruction of property and the aftershocks that followed the earthquake. What fascinated young Dorothy was to see how neighbors, who formerly did not even know each other's names, suddenly began to greet each other, were even sharing their food and water, taking care of the children and the elderly, and forming a true community. But when things returned to normal, the old indifference and individualism returned to their neighborhood. Dorothy Day's whole life was a quest to recapture that sense of community she had experienced after the earthquake. That quest led her into the Communist Party and eventually into the Catholic Church.

In 1932, already a Catholic, Dorothy Day went to Washington DC to cover a hunger march for the unemployed. During that time, she felt strongly her separation from her previous friends who were protesting under the socialist banner. Dorothy Day went into the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception here in Washington on December 8 and spent the morning in prayer, asking God to help her find a way to integrate her newly found Catholic faith with her concern for the poor. When she returned to New York, Peter Maurin was waiting for her; and that friendship transformed her life.

As a young seminarian here in Washington, I knew Dorothy Day, however, I never had the opportunity to meet Peter Maurin. I was involved with the Catholic worker here and the writings of Peter Maurin inspired me as a seminarian. He was an eccentric, French peasant who had been a lay brother. He was a man in love with Christ in the social message of the Gospel. Peter would go every day to give Dorothy Day her education, talking to her for hours about a Catholic outline of history, the Saints, the teachings of the Popes and what he called his personalist communitarian philosophy. Peter directed Dorothy Day's readings and formed her spiritually. Peter's philosophy was not to denounce, but announce. Dorothy once wrote: "He made you feel that you and all men had great and generous hearts with which to love God; he made you feel a sense of mission."

Peter Maurin used to say: “Modern society calls the beggar a bum and a panhandler and gives him the bum’s rush. But the Greeks used to say that people in need are ambassadors of the gods.” One of Peter’s famous writings is called *Easy Essays* and contains the following advice:

**The world would be better off  
if people tried  
to become better,**

**And people would  
become better  
if they stopped trying  
to be better off.**

**For when everyone tries  
to become better off,  
nobody is better off.**

**But when everyone tries  
to become better  
everyone is better off.**

**Everybody would be rich  
if nobody tried  
to become richer.**

**And nobody would be poor  
if everybody tried  
to be the poorest.**

**And everybody would be  
what he ought to be  
If everyone tried to be  
What he wants  
the other fellow to be.**

I am sure that Peter Maurin would have appreciated the story about Cardinal Spellman who one day was sitting in his office when the intercom rang. It was the new receptionist in the lobby of the Chancery who said in a whisper: “Your Eminence, there’s a man in the lobby who says he’s Jesus Christ. What should I do?” Without missing a beat, the Cardinal replied: “Look busy!” The Cardinal was right of course because that homeless, off his meds, schizophrenic man is Jesus Christ in a distressing disguise as Mother Teresa used to like to say.

It is healthy for young people today to hear about our saints and contemporary heroes like Dorothy Day, who after having an abortion and another child out of wedlock, became one of the most outstanding persons in the history of the Church in our country. Our young people want to see the ideals of the Gospel lived in our lives. One of the worst results of the current scandal in the Church can be a cynicism about the call to holiness in the Church. We run the risk of being overwhelmed by the bad example of priests and bishops and need to remind people that there have always been saints and sinners in the Church. The Church’s task is to call everyone to conversion. We have our successes and our failures. The saints are the success stories our young people need to know. It helps them to see that we, their teachers, are struggling on the same path to holiness.

We must also break the bad habit of presenting the Church in such a way that people are deceived into thinking that they can be Christians and remain strangers. The privatization of religion in today’s climate of new age individualism is poisonous to the Gospel message of community, of connectedness in the Body of Christ.

As a seminarian, I read an interview with Flannery O’Connor about growing up Catholic in the South. The famous author related how as a child she had a playmate, a little Baptist girl who was the closest of friends. She invited her friend to Mass one day. The little girl got permission from her mom and went with Flannery to church. Flannery couldn’t wait to hear her friend’s reaction. “Well, what do you think?” Flannery asked. Her little girlfriend said: “Wow, you Catholics really got something there. The music is so bad, the preaching is so boring, and all those people are there!”

In a culture addicted to entertainment, our young Catholics often find Sunday Mass a rather unsatisfying experience, like Flannery O’Connor’s Baptist girlfriend. Our challenge is to

be teachers of prayer. To help our young Catholics experience prayer so that when they gather for the Sunday Eucharist, they have a notion of why they are there and how to pray.

There can be no Catholic life, no holiness, no discipleship without prayer. Every Catholic school, every religious education program must have a prayer component that will help our young Catholics be part of a worshipping community. It is gathered around the altar that we recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread and where by partaking of the Eucharist we become one with Christ and with each other.

Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* states that these are profound links between Evangelization and human advancement and that there is an unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of one's concrete life, both personal and social.

Both Paul VII and Benedict XVI speak of development as a vocation that is derived from a transcendent call and affirm that there is no true humanism but that which is open to the absolute, and is conscious of a vocation which gives human life its true meaning. Pope Benedict writes: "If development were concerned with merely technical aspects of human life, and not with the meaning of man's pilgrimage through history in company with his fellow human beings, nor with identifying the goal of that journey, then the Church would not be entitled to speak on development, human advancement, a social Gospel.

### **Conclusion**

Our hope is that this conference will help us to discover more deeply the radical sense of our vocation to live the social Gospel, to put others first and seek the last place, to be close to Jesus who came to serve and not to be served. Love and justice must motivate us to work for a transformation of our own heart so that we can transform the world around us.

Among the first Christians, their sense of the presence of the Risen Lord was so strong that they gladly shared their possessions so that no one would be in want. They initiated the diaconate to overcome ethnic divisions. They took care of widows and orphans and rejected the Roman practice of abortion and infanticide. And Paul in his letter to Philemon states that Onesimus is a slave no longer, but rather a brother. Living out the Gospel always calls people to announce the kingdom and live the values of the kingdom here and now and in so doing to renew society by bringing the light of God's love and truth into the world.