

Keynote Address of Bishop Robert E. Barron, Auxiliary Bishop, Archdiocese of Los Angeles  
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*As delivered*

Well good morning everybody. I'm delighted to be with you, even at this great distance. I was hoping to be there, but the airlines had a different plan. But, delighted we could hook up at least this way this morning. And I have been following the Conference closely on YouTube, the internet, social media, so I've been catching some of the excitement and enthusiasm of it, and it's really lifted me up, I must say, to hear so many of you and to see so many of you dedicated to our great work of evangelization. Nothing's greater and nothing today is more challenging.

I'm sure you've heard now, in the different workshops and talks, discussion of the NONES. By that I don't mean the women religious, I mean the N-O-N-E-S: those who claim no religion. I won't go through all the stats with you, but just a couple: for every one person joining the Catholic Church today, six are leaving; Catholics thirty and younger, now fully fifty percent, one-half, of them identify as having no religion. My point here is we do have a fight on our hands when we evangelize in our culture today, but the great saints of our Church have always loved a good fight, and we should too.

So, to evangelize, I am going to say just a few simple things this morning. I think we are facing three great challenges; I think we have three great opportunities. And let's put all of it under the rubric of 'fighting the good fight'. It's an exciting time to be an evangelist. You know, just a general point before I begin, these reflections are not just based on theorizing, but on about fifteen years of in the trenches experience doing evangelization on the internet. And I love this about the internet, it gets you outside the walls of the Church, so it moves you into the realm of the NONES. And these are things that I've been hearing from people now for the past fifteen years, especially in that age group twenty and thirty-something.

So, three obstacles, three opportunities. Here's the first great obstacle that we're facing today, I think, what I would call scientism. Scientism. Now mind you, just to get it up front, the Catholic Church has nothing against the sciences, please don't believe that crazy, old mythology. The Catholic Church stands with the sciences at their best. What we oppose is scientism, which is the reduction of all knowledge to the scientific form of knowledge. What's the scientific form? Well you empirically investigate the world, you form hypotheses, you perform experiments to check the hypotheses. Terrific. Love the sciences – they've been massively successful and their attended technologies have been massively useful to us. I understand why people, especially young people, are so beguiled by the sciences. And we love them. What we don't love is a scientism that reduces all knowledge to the scientific form. To give this more of a classical name, is naturalism, maybe we'd call it. The human heart, as Augustine taught us long ago, is ordered to God. Our hearts are restless until they rest in God. And therefore, when we close ourselves in, to what Charles Taylor calls 'the buffered self', that means a self that is isolated from all reference to the transcendent, we do damage to the human heart, we do damage to the human spirit. And

I see that all the time. The culprit is this naturalism or materialism, scientism, that would close down the aspiration of the human spirit.

One of the signs, by the way, these are young people picking up from the Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, the new atheists – you talk about religion and they say oh come on, it's just a bunch of old nonsense, it's just a projection of our desires, it's bronze age mythology...this is a result of a scientism. You know, here is the first problem with scientism. It is, strictly speaking, self-refuting. Scientism is not discoverable through the scientific method. Where exactly did you empirically verify and test through experimentation that only scientific knowledge is valuable. No, in fact, scientism is a philosophical perspective and so, it's self-refuting. Here's something else. And it's this very summer that we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the appearance of Joseph Ratzinger's great work *Introduction to Christianity*. Could I recommend, everybody, if you've not read that, get a copy and read it. But one of the central arguments of that book is that the universal intelligibility of nature, the fact that everything in nature, in every nook and cranny from the highest to the lowest, is marked by intelligibility. That's the very ground for all the sciences. Every scientist goes out to meet a world that he or she is confident will be intelligible. Where's that come from? Why should the world be, in every detail, intelligible? Unless, Ratzinger argues, it's grounded in a creative intelligence. Scientism, naturalism, materialism is the first great obstacle we face because to evangelize is to speak of God. It's to speak of God. It is to break through the buffered self and to allow the human heart to fulfill its aspirations. OK, that's obstacle number one.

Number two is what I call the culture of 'm'eh'. M'eh, by the way, is spelled M-[apostrophe]-E-H. The m'eh culture. Now where's this come from? It's rampant today, especially among the young. If there really is no objective truth, if there really is no objective value, yeah your truth, my truth, that's good for you and it's not good for me and I'll tolerate you as long as you tolerate me. What that produces is the culture of m'eh. Or as the kids say, whatever. Whatever. You see, the whatever culture comes from the loss of a sense of the objectively good and the objectively true. Eh, your truth my truth, your good my good enervates first the person, and then the wider society. I'll give you an image from John Henry Newman I have always loved. Newman says what gives a river its verve and its energy is precisely the firmness of its banks. Think of the firm banks, and then the river rushes in between those banks. It's moving with energy; it's going somewhere. Knock down the banks in the name of freedom. Let the river be. Let it be what it wants to be. What's going to happen? That river is going to open up into this big, lazy lake. Placid, I suppose, but with no energy, no purpose. So I would say, our society today is a bit like that big, lazy lake. All of us floating individually on our own little air mattresses tolerating each other – I won't get in your way if you don't get in my way – but floating on the great, lazy lake without energy, without purpose. Evangelization, the declaration of the good news of Jesus, is meant precisely to send us on mission. It is indeed the declaration of a tremendous, objective good, an objective truth, which is meant to give us energy and verve. Think of a line that Dante loved to quote. Mary, once she received the message of the angel, went in haste. She went in haste to the hill country to visit her cousin. See, once you've been grasped by the power of God, once you've been addressed by a truly objective truth and good, then you know where to go and you do it with energy. One of the obstacles we face is this m'eh, whatever culture. No, no. We speak for objective truth and objective goodness.

Now here's a third obstacle that's closely related to the second one: what I call the culture of self-invention. The culture of self-invention. The roots of this go back to the nineteenth century. The figure I think is the most important philosopher of the nineteenth century, more important than Marx in terms of influence, is Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche who said, remember, we are beyond good and evil, those are all just constructs, and what remains is the will to power. The will to power of the individual. That's what remains. The twentieth century version of Nietzsche is Jean Paul Sartre, the founder of existentialism. So called, because Sartre says, existence precedes essence. It's a fancy philosophical way of saying my freedom comes first, and then I determine essence, who I am, the meaning of my life. But see, it's all done on the basis of my freedom. See what was at a high philosophical level in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century, what was bandied about in the cafes of Paris in the 1950s, has now become, I think, common knowledge among most high school and twenty-year old's in America today. My freedom determines the meaning of my life. Now you see it all over the place, don't you, the culture of self-invention. My sexuality, my gender, the purpose of my life: it's all up to me. I don't know if you saw this, it kind of went viral on the internet several months ago, but it was a young man doing this interview at a college in the Pacific Northwest I think it was. And he was just at random asking these kids as they came by these questions. And this guy was a male, about five-foot-ten, maybe thirty-five years old. And he would say to the people, 'Now what if I told you that I was a woman.' And to a person, the kids all said, 'well if that's who you feel you are, then who I am to tell you otherwise.' Then he said, 'What if I were to tell you that I'm an Asian woman?' They didn't hesitate and said, 'Well, if that's what you feel you are, and want to be, that's ok'. And I love this, the third one, which they balked at a little bit. He said, 'well what if I told you I was a six-foot-five Asian woman.' And I say the kids balked a little bit, but then they all, to a person, said, 'No, if that's what you think you are and want to be, who am I to tell you otherwise?'

Now, you know what that is, in sort of comic form, what we call in philosophy, voluntarism. The triumph of the will over the intellect. Nietzsche and Sartre, you've got it in high philosophical form, but now you've got it in almost every kid in America. The triumph of will over intellect. The world is what I want it to be. I determine the meaning of my life. You know I mentioned Joseph Ratzinger already, go back to Benedict XVI's *Regensburg Address*, which has caused so much controversy, but look at the heart of that address. What is it? It's a critique of voluntarism. Wherever it comes up, and yet he critiques it within Christianity when it appears. That's the great obstacle, Ratzinger thought, to cultural progress today. I would say it's one of the great obstacles to evangelization. Why? Because to evangelize is to say your life is not about you. Your life is not up to you. In fact, the ecstatic expression of Paul, 'It's no longer I who live, it's Christ who lives in me.' When you've been seized by the power of Jesus Christ, your little ego-drama becomes pretty unimportant. Right? What I want to do, what I want to accomplish, the person I think I am, who cares finally? 'It's no longer I who live, it's Christ who lives in me.' To evangelize, therefore, is to stand athwart to this culture of self-invention. It's the Theodrama that matters, not the ego-drama. You know, I'll just close this section with this line. The great biblical truth is 'the truth shall set you free'. John Paul exploited that all the time, didn't he: to show the correlation between intellect and will, between freedom and truth. It's not my little will that invents the truth. No, it's the truth that sets me authentically free. That's the word of evangelization.

OK, those I think everybody, based on my years of doing this work are three of the major obstacles we face: this reductive scientism, this culture of self-invention, and this m'eh, whatever culture. So now, three, I'll call them opportunities, maybe three strategies moving forward. And I'm going to list them according to the great transcendentals of the true and the good and the beautiful.

So, first of all, the true. Now I know anyone that has been following me over the years knows what I feel about this, but I'm going to say it again anyway. I hate dumbed down Catholicism. And, you know, my generation which came of age right after the Council, I think was the first one to receive a dumbed down Catholicism. What I mean is one that puts a huge stress on the superficial. I call mine the banners and balloons Catholicism. We are a smart religion. When we don't express Christianity and Catholicism in a smart way, people fall away. It happened, by the way, to my generation. I think what happened is a lot of us you now grew up and faced the trials of life and this superficial, unintelligent Catholicism was not enough to sustain people. You know, just recently I was working on the script for the Flannery O'Connor episode of my new series. I'm doing a new series called *The Pivotal Players*. And of course, I just love Flannery O'Connor. You know what struck me, especially as I read her letters again: how smart she was, how well read she was. Everyone from Jacques Maritain to Thomas Murton and of course, Thomas Aquinas, our great figures embrace the intelligence of Catholicism. We got to do it to, everybody, if we are going to evangelize effectively. Again, armies of young people, who see over and over again, who claim over and over again that Catholicism is just a lot of old nonsense. We have to pick up our game intellectually if we are going to evangelize effectively today. Can I just suggest one particular area and here I am especially addressing all the catechists and the apologists and the evangelists in the audience today? Can we pick up our game around the question of God? Around the question of God. I find it over and over again that young people think the speech about God is a lot of nonsense. Or if they do talk about God, they don't know what they are talking about. They don't understand what we mean when we use the word God. Can I make this a little more specific? Can I suggest that every apologist, evangelist, catechist, should have a good grasp of one of the great arguments for God's existence. I think it would help a lot, especially with our young people. And let me suggest one version that has been helpful to me in my evangelical work. It's the argument from contingency and it's actually rather simple to state.

We're surrounded by contingent things. That just means things that don't explain themselves. Things that don't contain within themselves the reason for their own existence. I'm a contingent thing because I had parents, I eat and drink, and I'm currently breathing air. That means my existence is dependent on all types of external factors. Everything in this room where I am is contingent. It doesn't explain itself but was brought into being by external factors. Okay. And you know, all the sciences assume this, which is why they look for causes. Now, those things that brought my existence into being – are they self-explanatory? Well no, all those things I mentioned are themselves, contingent. Okay. Back and back we go. What can't we do? We can't proceed infinitely along these lines, because then we haven't explained anything. All we have done is infinitely postponed the explanation. We must come finally to some great reality whose very nature is to be. And who in turn gives rise, moment to moment, to the whole of the finite world. When Moses asked God his name, that magnificent, mysterious answer came back, 'I am who I am.' Thomas Aquinas read that as 'I am the one in whom essence and existence coincide. My very nature is to be.' That's what we mean when we use the word God. That reality which under girds

and gives rise to and explains the whole realm of the contingent world. Mind you this, I love how that proof does not give rise to a vague deism. So many of the young people, if they talk about God, talk about God in that way. Oh this distant being up there, out there somewhere or way back in time. No, no! The God I'm talking about is the God that sustains the whole universe, moment to moment, the way a singer sustains a song. Thomas speaks of *creatio continua* – continual creation. See, that's the God that the great Catholic tradition talks about. Can we recover this richly intellectual sense and convey it to our young people? The true. The true. No to dumbed down Catholicism. Yes, to an embrace of our great intellectual tradition. This is a whole another talk, but I mention this a lot: the need for a new apologetics. Man, do we need it today, especially in light of the new atheism. Ok, so that's the true.

Second opportunity or second strategy I'll put under this great rubric of the good. The good. It's simply a fact, everybody, that the most powerful force for evangelization in the first decades and centuries of the Church's life was precisely the goodness of the Christian people. That wonderful remark reported by Tertullian: how these Christians love one another. That's what galvanized the world. That's what grabbed the attention of the pagan society. In the time when unwanted children were simply exposed on the mountain side. At a time when the sick and the poor were simply left by the roadside. Christians cared, not only for their own, but they cared indiscriminately for anyone who was in need. It was the goodness, it was the radicality of the Christian life that got the attention of the world. Fast forward a few more centuries. The monastic movement begins with someone like Anthony in the desert and his followers endeavoring to live the Christian life in its radicality: poverty, simplicity, utter trust in God's providence. Anthony gives rise to the monastic movement, which influences eventually Benedict, whose movement re-evangelizes and re-civilizes Europe after the fall of Rome. Fast forward several more centuries. At a time of deep corruption, especially among the clergy, Francis and Dominic emerge, again, with a back-to-basics evangelicalism: simplicity of life, poverty, trust in God's providence. And those mendicant movements grabbed the attention of Europe and eventually the wider world. Fast forward to the Reformation and the great Jesuit movement emerging. Same inspiration. Look at Ignatius on radical detachment, surrender to God's purposes and providence. And the Jesuits too, re-evangelize Europe, and they evangelize most of the world. Fast forward to the period after the French revolution. The rise of these great religious orders to address the problem of a rising secularism. Twentieth century figures like Charles de Foucauld and the greatest evangelist of the twentieth century. I think John Paul was the second greatest. The greatest evangelist of the twentieth century: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who by the sheer intensity of her living the Christian life, evangelized. The good: living the Christian life in its radical form still has a powerful evangelical impact. And here, Pope Francis comes readily to mind.

What has grabbed the attention of the world but precisely these displays of love and compassion, inclusion, simplicity of life, trust in God's providence – Pope Francis has put on international display the radicality of the Christian life and that has evangelized. So now, we all know this, you don't need me to tell you we've all been living through a very painful time in the Catholic Church the last twenty-five or thirty years. In fact, the worst period clearly in the history of the American Church. What do we need to do? And I mean all of us, I mean all of us those priests and bishops, religious, all the baptized, all those involved in the life of the Church – we need to recover what all these great figures found: the splendidly radical form of the Christian life. When it's lived publicly, it evangelizes. You know I'll mention here

my great spiritual mentor, the late Cardinal George of Chicago. We would talk often about this period of the Church's life: the scandals, the difficulties. And he would say, "Where are the orders? Where are the orders? Where are the movements? I'm looking for the signs of life." And what he meant was it's precisely at these times of crisis that the great orders and movements emerged. And so he said, "Where are they? I'm looking for them." I'm looking for them too. I think we've all got that responsibility now to do something radical for the sake of evangelization.

OK lastly – so we've got our three obstacles and our three strategies: the true, the good, and finally the beautiful. Now I've been on this for a while. Those that have been following me in my video work know this, that especially in our postmodern time, when appeals to the true are often met with resistance, even more appeals to good, you know here's the way you should live your life, the hackles tend to go up. So, in this time, I've suggested, it might be best to begin with the third transcendental: the beautiful. Just show people the beauty of Catholicism. Now Pope Francis speaks in *Evangelii Gaudium* about the *via pulchritudinis* – the way of beauty. Show them Chartres Cathedral, show them the Sainte-Chapelle, show them the Sistine Chapel, show them Mother Theresa's sisters at work. Don't tell them automatically what to think and how to behave. Show the beauty of Catholicism and that has an evangelical power. Think of the great playwright Paul Claudel, who is converted to the Faith looking up at the rose window at Notre Dame Cathedral. I totally get that because something similar happened to me when I was a young guy going over to Paris for my doctoral studies and seeing that same great north rose window. I didn't need to be converted, but I mean it opened up my Catholic heart in a new way. I get it. The beautiful is a means of evangelization.

Now let me just say a quick thing about the beautiful because I realized some people might say 'well that's nice you know, the beautiful, but it sounds a little bit, I don't know, sentimental or superficial.' Here I rely on the great Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand. Von Hildebrand distinguished between what he called the merely subjectively satisfying and the objectively valuable. The merely subjectively satisfying and the objectively valuable. The merely subjectively satisfying, you know is something that I like if it appeals to me. So if you were to ask me so what's your favorite food, I would probably if I'm really honest and not trying to seem sophisticated would probably say pizza. Maybe a deep-dish Chicago pizza is my favorite food. Well yeah, I find that subjectively satisfying, but it would never occur to me in a million years to become an evangelist for pizza. Right? It's my thing, it's a matter of my taste. The objectively valuable is not like that. The objectively valuable is something that is so intrinsically good and intrinsically beautiful that it seizes us, it stops us in our tracks. You know that beautiful phrase 'aesthetic arrest': when you're stopped in your tracks. And then it rearranges our subjectivity. It doesn't fit into our subjectivity, it rearranges it and then sends us on mission. Think for example, you know if you were taken into the Sistine Chapel and someone shows you the ceiling and you were to say 'yeah, yeah I just don't care for it.' You're treating something objectively valuable as though it's merely a matter of objective satisfaction. Or someone plays you the fourth movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony, with the *Ode to Joy*, and you say 'Eh, that doesn't appeal to me'. [Laughing] It doesn't appeal to you? It's not supposed to appeal to you, it's meant to change you. It's meant to seize you. It's meant to rearrange you from the inside out. That's what the objectively valuable does.

You know, another example, some years ago there was a survey in *Rolling Stone* magazine and it asked a number of rock stars themselves, ‘What’s the first song that rocked your world?’ What’s the first song that rocked your world? And I love how that was phrased because they didn’t say ‘What was the first song that you liked – the first song that you found catchy?’ That’s the subjectively satisfying. What’s the first song that rocked your world? And I could answer mine was Bob Dylan’s *Like a Rolling Stone* which I heard for the first time when I was about seventeen. I didn’t just like it, it’s a song that made me different, that reached down inside of me and rearranged me in a way. The beautiful, by which I mean the objectively valuable, sends us on mission. Does that make sense everybody? You know what I’m talking about. Not just something you find superficially appealing, but something that has really reached into your very soul automatically sends you on mission to announce it to everybody else. Have you noticed, and it’s distinctive to me in the New Testament, there’s a grab-you-by-the-shoulders quality about the New Testament? That’s to say, it’s written by people who don’t just don’t want to share nice spiritual truths with the world, and we have a thousand-people sharing nice spiritual truths. No, no, these are people that have been seized by something so powerful and so overwhelming that they want to grab the whole world by the shoulders and tell them about it. Not because they are being imperialistic. Not because they are trying to impose their views on others. No, no. It’s that same way that you become an evangelist of the truly beautiful.

There’s nothing more beautiful than they dying and rising of Jesus Christ. There’s nothing more beautiful than they dying and rising of Jesus Christ.

And we today need to be filled with the same shake-you-by-the-shoulders enthusiasm that the first evangelists had. And see, the dying and rising of Jesus is precisely what is communicated in the beauty of the great Catholic aesthetic and artistic tradition. That’s what animates Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*; that’s what’s animating Notre Dame Cathedral. What’s animating the Sistine Chapel ceiling is the beauty of Christ risen from the dead. And you see friends, it’s with that same shake-you-by-the-shoulders enthusiasm that we’re meant to go forth today. Yes, in a difficult time. Yeah, we face obstacles. I just named three of them. But the saints always loved a good fight and we should love a good fight too because we go forth with this great truth of Jesus Christ. We go forth with this great goodness embodied in Jesus Christ. We go forth with what is most splendidly beautiful. And with those strategies, we can do this great work of evangelization today.

God bless you all. Thank you for the great work you do, and please, pray for me.