



ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

OFFICE OF THE RECTOR

10701 South Military Trail ~ Boynton Beach, Florida 33436-4899

Tel: 561.732.4424 ~ Fax: 561.737.2205

RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

15 NOVEMBER 2012

“Seeds of Hope spread through the public witness of the priest”

We have heard a lot about “hope and change” this past month! But *that* “hope and change” cannot save souls. However, you my dear brothers are the hope that can change the course of human history, thus the title of tonight’s conference: “Seeds of Hope spread through the public witness of the priest.”

A little over six years ago my dear father died after a very short battle with Pancreatic Cancer. My Dad was a man of deep faith and he faced the end of his life with the courage and conviction of a Christian. He took as his motto that of Padre Pio: “Pray, hope, and don’t worry.” Isn’t that exactly what each of us should be doing on a daily basis? As St. Paul wrote to the Romans: “Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer” (Rm. 12:12). Rejoice in hope and persevere in prayer! The Christian always lives with hope, my Dad knew that his citizenship was in Heaven and that no matter what, as he walked his daily journey not knowing precisely when his impending death would come, for him “life was Christ and death was victory” (cf. Phil. 1:21-23).

Hope is the Theological Virtue that keeps us looking “forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” Hope reminds us that we are never alone, and that no matter how dark the hour may seem, we are never abandoned. When Pope Benedict XVI came for his apostolic visit to the United States in 2006 he chose as his theme: “Christ our Hope!” He also chose the topic of hope for his second encyclical letter entitled *Spe Salvi* in 2007. Pope Benedict wrote:

When no one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, he can help me. When I have been plunged into complete solitude ...; if I pray I am never totally alone. The late Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, a prisoner for thirteen years, nine of them spent in solitary confinement, has left us a precious little book: *Prayers of Hope*. During thirteen years in jail, in a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness, the fact that he could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope, which enabled him, after his release, to become for people all over the world a witness to hope—to that great hope which does not wane even in the nights of solitude (*Spe Salvi*, 32).

Hope is the fundamental virtue that keeps us focused on the positive in the midst of seeming defeat. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (I Cor. 15:55). That is why we pray daily in the Embolism of the Lord’s Prayer: “as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ!” *Beatam Spem* – blessed hope! We have one Savior and He

will deliver us! The question we must ask ourselves regularly is, am I living for Heaven? Is my life focused on the final goal every day?

On the pinnacle of the Basilica of St. Paul's in Rome is a beautiful marble cross with the words "*spes unica*" inserted in mosaic. The Cross is our only hope – again think of the image of the Great Cross in St. Augustine on our Year of Faith prayer card. The Mystery of the Cross - Christ's passion, death, and resurrection - is truly our only hope. Without Christ, life is hopeless! That is why our task of priestly formation is so urgent, the world needs you to offer hope. A priestly life well-lived offers just such hope to the world. We must know who we are and be firmly grounded in the faith in order to offer hope to our brothers and sisters. That is why the author of Hebrews writes, "[...] be strongly encouraged to hold fast to the hope that lies before us. This we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm [...]" (Heb. 6:19-19). Hope anchors us and keeps us firmly moored during the storms of life: in the face of sickness and death, in the face of loneliness and frustration, in the face of sorrow and distress it is hope that helps us to overcome, because Christ is our hope!

We spoke in the last rector's conference about our need to be credible witnesses and today we speak of our need to be hope-filled witnesses. Our Holy Father wrote, "Hope in a Christian sense is always hope for others as well. It is an active hope, in which we struggle to prevent things moving towards the 'perverse end'. It is an active hope also in the sense that we keep the world open to God. Only in this way does it continue to be a truly human hope" (*Spe Salvi*, 34). Hope is not individualistic, it is always open to other and for others (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 28). We are to be seeds of hope in the midst of our church and society.

I now want to take a more practical look at four ways in which we bring hope into the world and then conversely the pitfalls that can cause despair.

1) The faithful want to see something different in us. As St. Paul wrote, "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rm. 12:2). Be transformed by your time in priestly formation; transformed more and more into the image and likeness of Christ himself. Remember the word for "holy" in Hebrew is *kadosh* – meaning separated. We are called to daily enter into the Holy of Holies in order to be transformed. "Prayer is the school of hope," according to Pope Benedict XVI (*Spe Salvi*, 32). As priests and future priests, we are to foster a "monasticism of the heart"; an inner sanctum in which we encounter the living God and allow Him to form us on a daily basis. When we are in the parish or even on vacation our schedules and daily horarium should look different from that of other people my age – does my life revolve around God? Is it marked by times of prayer? Am I in relationship and seeking Communion with the Blessed Trinity? The heart open to this kind of ongoing conversion offers great hope to the world – when people see in us a person who is striving for holiness we bring them great hope!

The reverse side of this coin is when we try to be like everyone else. People really do want more from us. Whether it is our use of language, or inappropriate relationships, or the way we dress (don't be a fashion plate), or our use of alcohol, or our social activities, or any form of a worldly lifestyle. The *Code of Canon Law* reminds us, "Clerics are to follow a simple way of life and avoid anything which smacks of worldliness (*vanitatem*)" (*CIC* 282). Regarding our call to not be conformed to this age, I would like to say a few words about the use of alcohol and invite us to pay close attention to any abuse of this substance and its addictive nature. A priest who drinks heavily does not engender hope in the people of God. We heard St. Paul's admonition in

Monday's Liturgy that leaders not be drunkards (Titus 1:8-9). This insidious vice can sneak up on us and bite us if we are not cautious, prudent and moderate in our drinking. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that "the virtue of temperance disposes us to *avoid every kind of excess*: the abuse of food, alcohol, tobacco, or medicine" (CCC 2290). There is *never* a reason to have more than two to three drinks as a maximum. I pray that this is not an issue in our house of formation, but at times I have heard of occasional abuses in the past. Such abuse will be addressed in the future out of love and concern for the individual and the people of God.

2) Be present when needed for the joys and sorrows of people's lives; especially the sorrows – we offer hope for Eternal Life and remind them that God has not abandoned them. I think back to moments with the dying or ministering to families in ICU – what might not seem like a big deal, or what might have seemed like an inconvenience, can be life changing for the person in need. The stories I still hear from fifteen years ago from my first assignment humble me, because very often I simply do not remember these pivotal moments they experienced. Being a good priest is not rocket science, it is as easy as "just showing up"; and that self-oblation and availability we offer make all the difference in the world. Being present in order to bring hope also can happen when we are not even trying. A priest who is in the regular habit of wearing the Roman collar will be a billboard for Eternity as he goes about his daily business. Don't underestimate the power of our priestly presence in the marketplace – indeed we offer hope!

On the flip side, when we don't show up when we are needed, or when we fail to return calls from parishioners in a timely fashion we fail to offer them hope. My former parish of Christ the King was a parish that could be counted on and people deeply appreciated it. There would be times that the answering service would call us when they could not reach the neighboring parish who was being contacted. Now mind you it would make me crazy when other churches would show a lack of responsibility by not answer their emergency line – I would later contact the pastor out of justice and find out if there was an issue as to why their call needed to be answered by us – but the point is there were souls on the other end who needed a priest and our pastoral zeal to help must override our personal comfort. Despair and distress (and a few nasty phone calls) follow when we don't respond to our people in need. There will be countless occasions when God will use you as an instrument of healing and hope for his people.

Another important moment to be present is on Sundays. Now this may sound like a no-brainer, but you might be surprised that the day that should have "all hands on deck" is not always so. When we don't show up on Sundays to greet and assist with Holy Communion we are missing a huge opportunity to be present to our family. The faithful will never get to know, love, and trust us if they only see us at the Masses we celebrate in our monthly rotation. The little things matter – you bring hope when you just show up at Mass, at meetings, at the hospital, at the Knights of Columbus Fish Fry, at school, or even at the occasional First Communion party.

3) Youth and Young Adult Ministry: Make the youth a priority – they are the hope for the future of the Church. There are occasions in which I hear of a newly ordained telling the pastor "I don't do youth ministry" – wrong answer. We do whatever the needs of our parishes are. I remember showing up to my first assignment and being told by the pastor to get on a bus the next day to drive up to Atlanta with 100 teens I had never met before. That was frightening, but the fruit of a priestly presence makes all the difference in the world when it comes to young people. The bonds that were made with the youth on this trip have resulted in weddings, baptisms, seminarians, and a religious sister. Teens and college age students are like sponges desiring to soak up the Truth. If we shun our responsibility as spiritual fathers then we will lose the battle of transforming our

society. They need us to bring them hope, and their youthful zeal and un-jaded innocence offers us hope in return.

When we show no interest in the New Evangelization and the New Generation of young people – can you say hello to the evangelical Church down the street? A former parishioner came up to me when I first arrived and said that his daughters were all going to an evangelical youth group and that he would so have much preferred them to be exposed to the riches of our Catholic faith. My first hire was a director of youth ministry and two years later, his daughters who were beginning to drift from the Church were now leaders amongst our own youth group. We offer hope to the whole parish when they see an active and vibrant youth ministry. Funds and human resources must be allocated in order to make it happen, and the active presence of one of the priests of the parish is paramount for its success, and as the newly ordained that will most likely fall to you – get ready!

4) Preach on difficult issues, but that is only after the faithful get to know you and know that you have their best interests in mind. Once you have established spiritual clout with them they will follow you, their shepherd. Now I don't mean preaching a fire and brim stone every week, but there are appropriate occasions throughout the year in which we must speak the Truth of the Church's teaching. We now live in a nation in which the majority no longer holds to traditional Judeo-Christian values. It has become quite evident recently that the moral teachings of the Church are no longer valued by the mainstream and sadly, by many Catholics as well, whether that be on the nature of and the indissolubility of marriage between a man and a woman; contraception; abortion; euthanasia; fetal stem cell research; religious liberty; etc. You give hope to the faithful that the Church still has a moral voice when you preach the Truth in Love. Our vocation reminds them that we are all "here is to get out of here" – i.e. to live in freedom, to draw closer to the Lord, and get to Heaven; that is where our true citizenship lies.

When the faithful don't hear the Good News preached, they get discouraged. Words of encouragement, counsel, and even at times words of challenge – all offered in love and with the Gospel message of Christ as the center bring our people great hope. When we fail to live and preach prophetically we offer the faithful no hope for the future. Our ministry is not social work; we must not cease striving to "save souls" and build up the Kingdom. We have the opportunity to bring great joy and hope or be the source of despair and distrust. *Gaudium et Spes* are the first words of the Vatican II Document on the *Church in the Modern World*. *Gaudium et Spes*, Joy and Hope, if we are to make Christ and His Church relevant in today's world, we must be men of joy and hope. We bring hope to the faithful by being fully integrated men, certainly human, certainly men who make mistakes, but men who are striving to be men of faith, not drawing attention to ourselves but to Christ. We are "clay vessels," and we recognize that from the beginning Christ called a bunch of characters. *We* are comforted and given *hope* by the words of our Lord: "It was not you who chose me; it was I who chose you to go forth and bear fruit" (John 15:16).

Due to scandal in the Church, many have had their faith shaken regarding the very nature of the priesthood. While the sacraments are not dependent upon the worthiness of the minister, there is the subjective responsibility of the ordained to respond to the gift received at ordination. For the sake of God's people, priests must foster their personal character and align it with the sacramental character received at ordination that we may be credible witnesses in order that "the world may believe in him who sent us." Fr. Federico Suarez writes, "Each individual must behave in accordance with what he is. The priest, a consecrated man, has a special quality, the quality of something holy, for his sacramental consecration endows him with a sacred character. He can no longer behave as if this special quality did not exist. He is a man of God, belonging no longer to

himself but to God alone.” We are certainly not better than anyone else, but because of our state in life as an ordained witness to Christ, the call to holiness is elevated and the obligation is inherent to be a man of extraordinary virtue.

In today’s world, and even in the Church, there is a temptation to despair. However, Christian hope, the theological virtue, is to be the rock of our lives. The great French writer, Georges Bernanos, once wrote about “real hope.” He said that it “must be won. [We] can only attain hope through truth, at the cost of great effort and long patience... Hope is a virtue, *virtus*, strength; a heroic determination of the soul. [And] the highest form of hope is despair overcome” (“Sermon of an Agnostic on the Feast of St. Therese”). St. Paul reminds us in Romans 5:3-5: “*We even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us.*” Remain steadfast, remain in His love, “the highest form of hope is despair overcome.” Christ is our hope!

As I close tonight, I want to quote at length from a writing of the late second century called *The Letter to Diognetus*, in which the community is commended to keep their eyes on Heaven as their true homeland:

Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. [...] And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. [...]

They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they, rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life. [...]

To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all the cities of the world, but cannot be identified with the world. As the visible body contains the invisible soul, so Christians are seen living in the world, but their religious life remains unseen. The body hates the soul and wars against it, not because of any injury the soul has done it, but because of the restriction the soul places on its pleasures. Similarly, the world hates the Christians, not because they have done it any wrong, but because they are opposed to its enjoyments.

Christians love those who hate them just as the soul loves the body and all its members despite the body’s hatred. It is by the soul, enclosed within the body, that the body is held together, and similarly, it is by the Christians, detained in the world as in a prison, that the world is held together. The soul, though immortal, has a mortal dwelling place; and Christians also live for a time amidst perishable things, while awaiting the freedom from change and decay that will be theirs in heaven. As the soul benefits from the deprivation of food and drink, so Christians flourish under persecution. Such is the Christian’s lofty and divinely appointed function, from which he is not permitted to excuse himself.

Now *that* is “hope and change” we can believe in, because Christ is our Hope! It is said that “hope springs Eternal,” indeed hope moves us forward to Eternal Life. May our world see this hope proclaimed through our lives.

We now turn to our Blessed Mother in order to be fortified and encouraged, to be reminded that our citizenship is in Heaven with her Divine Son, Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ our King! Mary, you are our life, our sweetness, and our HOPE.
Pray for us, O holy Mother of God; that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.