

**Disciples and Teachers of the Word:
Living The Gospel Message of Reconciliation**

Address to Catholic Formation and Leadership Conference

San Antonio, Texas
October 26, 2007

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¡Saludos, mis hermanos y hermanas en Cristo Jesús! Greetings,
my brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus!

It's a joy for me to be here with you today! Thank you for this chance to speak with you today. Let me start by telling you how grateful I am for your service to our young people! For your service to Christ!

I know there are lots of career options for people with your many skills and qualifications. You have chosen to serve our Lord in the noble task of "teacher." To answer the call to be a *profesor*. For this, the entire Church in San Antonio is grateful.

This is a great day, my friends! One of the most beautiful teachings of the Church is the reality of the communion of saints. To be united in prayer and love to the risen Jesus and in him to be united to believers in this world and in the world to come.

Today our Catholic brothers and sisters in Austria are celebrating a special feast. They're beatifying Franz Jägerstätter, a peasant farmer who was a great witness to the faith in our times. "Blessed Franz of Linz" is what he will be called from now on.

He was a martyr. The Nazis cut off his head in 1943 because he refused to help Hitler's army.

Franz made the decision to follow Christ. To obey the Word of God rather than men (Acts 5:29). While he was in prison awaiting execution, he wrote to his dear wife and children. He wrote: "One week passes after another; the important thing is that we do not let a single day go by in vain without putting it to good use for eternity."

This is a good place for us to begin today, my friends. With the reality that what we do—everything we do—we can do for God. There's nothing we do that should be in vain. We've been given many gifts. We must put them to good use for eternity.

And what a great thing you have chosen to do! To use your gifts to be teachers! Remember: that's what they called Jesus. That's what he called himself. *Teacher. El Maestro*. "You call me Teacher and Lord and you are right," he said. "For so I am. . . . I have given you an example. That you also should do as I have done" (John 13:13, 15).

Dear teachers: You are following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. The Teacher. *El Maestro*. He has given you the example. Do what he does.

No matter what subject you teach, you can bear witness to Jesus Christ. You can help open your students' eyes to see Christ in their lives. In their world. You can help them to know Jesus as the Lord of history and the Lord of creation. As the source of all wisdom and happiness.

“Learn from me,” Jesus said (Matt. 11:29). This is a commandment to us. Each of us is called to be a student of Jesus Christ. That’s what the word “disciple” means. We have to live our lives in *his* classroom. As his students. Learning at the feet of *El Maestro*, the Teacher.

That’s why the theme for your conference today intrigues me. For we encounter our Teacher, the living Christ, in the pages of sacred Scripture.

St. Thomas Aquinas said sacred Scripture is the “heart of Christ” (*Catechism*, 112). That’s a beautiful idea. Because it’s true: Scripture opens up for us the very heart of God. Scripture reveals the love of God that’s at the heart of history and creation.

The Bible tells the story of how God created the world and gave it to his children to be a place where they could live together in love. But his children rejected their Father. In their selfishness, they turned away from his love. Their rebellion brought them only sorrow, alienation, and exile.

Finally, in the New Testament, the Father sends his only Son to call his children home. In the heart of Christ, opened on the cross, God offered his children a new testament. Jesus makes it possible for us to again say, “*Abba!* Father!”

When Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), it’s like a summary of the human history. From Adam and Eve to the kingdom of Israel to me and you. We all know the story: A son rejects his Father and tries to live without him. He wanders the world in sin and confusion. Finally, he repents and comes back to the Father, seeking his forgiveness. And the Father welcomes him with open arms.

People want to know what the “message” of the Bible is. That’s what it’s all about. The Bible is the gospel of reconciliation. The good news that our God is a Father rich in mercy. That he forgives our sins. That he wants to welcome every man and woman, from every nation and culture, into a communion of love.

Since your theme today is sacred Scripture, I thought it would be appropriate if we did a little Bible study together this morning. It’s ok. You didn’t need to bring your Bibles! I want to talk about a story you all know very well.

It’s the one from Luke 24 about the disciples on the road to Emmaus. We read it every Easter season because it’s a story about the afternoon of the very first Easter.

You remember it. The two disciples are returning from Jerusalem. They are very sad. They had followed Jesus to Jerusalem. They had high hopes that he was the promised Messiah who had come to liberate Israel. They had watched in horror as the chief priests and rulers handed Jesus over to be scourged and crucified.

Three days had gone by and that morning some women disciples had discovered that the tomb of Jesus was empty. The women told the other disciples they had seen angels. The angels had told them that Jesus was alive. But nobody had seen Jesus risen from the dead. So nobody believed these women.

The disciples are talking about these things as they walk back home to Emmaus. That’s when they meet up with Jesus. Only they don’t recognize it’s Jesus.

Jesus doesn’t let on to his true identity. He asks them some questions. And after they tell him everything that’s been going on he starts explaining the Scriptures to them.

Now after that, the disciples invite him to stay with them. He does. And then Jesus blesses bread, breaks it, and gives it to them. At that moment they realize who he is. And immediately, he vanishes.

Ok. We all know the story. But why am I telling it to you today? Because, my friends, this a story about discipleship. About conversion. About coming to belief in Jesus Christ.

Emmaus is the story of every disciple. So it's your story and mine. And it's also the story of every person we are called to meet and to teach. It's also a story about catechesis and the teaching of the faith. Because being a disciple means being a teacher of Christ.

Let's look at it again more closely to see what I mean.

The story begins with the two disciples "on the road." What happens to these disciples has a spiritual meaning for every disciple. The road these disciples are traveling on is the road of life.

The disciples are making their way alone and in despair. They see no reason to believe. They aren't looking for God anymore. They're just talking to each other, trying to make sense of things for themselves.

This is how it is today with many people we meet. Many people are going down the road of life without faith. Without hope.

One big reason for unbelief today is that we live in a secular, materialistic culture. That means people are very comfortable. They have a lot of things. They can feel pretty self-sufficient. Like they're in control of their destiny. And a lot of our brothers and sisters live this way. As if they're doing quite fine without God.

Sometimes I think people today have become “deists.” They may accept the reality of God intellectually. God as a kind of universe-maker. But they don’t believe in a *personal* God. A God who cares for us and who calls us his children.

But God *is* a personal God. A loving and merciful God. Our God doesn’t just *make* the world. He is a living and active part of it. That’s what we see at Emmaus. Luke says: “While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with him.”

That’s a great spiritual truth, my friends. No matter where we are on the road of life, Jesus draws near to be with us. We may be sunk in despair or lost like the prodigal son in sin and bad living. But because of his great love, Christ comes to seek us out.

But we have to be able to recognize him. You know, this theme runs through all of the Easter stories. The blindness of unbelief. We all remember “doubting Thomas.” Remember what he said? “Unless I see . . . I will not believe” (John 20:25).

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus criticizes the disciples for their “unbelief and hardness of heart. *Because they had not believed those who saw him* after he had risen” (Mark 16:14). We see the same thing on the road to Emmaus. Jesus criticizes these disciples, too. He says they are “foolish . . . slow of heart to believe.”

Luke says the disciples’ “eyes were kept from recognizing him.” Why? Because they were like Thomas and the others. They had not “seen” Jesus rise from the dead, so they didn’t believe it.

That’s a problem, too, for us trying to believe in Jesus. Because none of us has *seen* the risen Christ. All we have is what the Bible and the Church’s tradition tells us. But none of that can be “proven.”

We've never met anyone who can walk on water, or multiply loaves and fishes, or raise a man from the dead. We do know smart and wise people. So we can accept that Jesus was a wise teacher and a holy man. But we don't have any "proof" that he is what the Church says he is—the Son of God, our Savior, and our Lord.

For that kind of knowledge, we need the gift of faith. This is what Christ draws near to give us. The gift of faith. Faith is like life. We didn't give ourselves life. And we can't give ourselves faith. It comes to us, like life does, as the free gift of God. But we have to accept that gift. We have to make an act of faith.

That's why St. Paul talks about the "obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5). Faith requires obedience. It means we have to give ourselves completely in trust. Of course, Mary is the great example of faith. What Elizabeth said about her is true: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:45).

Mary believed in God's Word. And blessed are we, if we believe in God's Word. In the testimony of Scripture and the Church. That was Christ's answer to Thomas, as you recall: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those *who have not seen and yet believe*" (John 20:29).

That's us, my friends. We have not seen. But we must believe. "For we walk by faith, not by sight," Paul said (2 Cor. 5:7). Unless we believe, unless we have faith, Jesus is just another teacher. Another rabbi from ancient Israel.

St. Edith Stein, a great philosopher and another martyr killed by the Nazis, said we need to live with "holy realism" (Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, 10–11).

That means we have to believe that reality is far more than what we can see and feel or “prove” in a laboratory. We have to believe that history is more than a record of what’s happened among men and women here on earth.

Holy realism means believing that God has a plan for history. That history is what St. Edith called “salvation history.” It means believing that God has a plan for each of our individual histories. For your life. And for mine.

Holy realism is what Paul is talking about in the first chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, which is one of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture.

He says that God “chose us . . . before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and . . . he destined us in love to be his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ. . . . [We] have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.”

That means that whether you’re aware of it or not, each one of you has a special calling from God. A special role to play in his plan. You are created to be his sons and daughters. To be holy. To be saints. To praise him and to bring other souls to friendship with him.

That’s what we want to be, my brothers and sisters! Holy men and women. *Saints. Holy realists!* We want to walk by the obedience of faith. Giving our lives to Christ. Willing to lay down our lives for Christ. Like St. Edith Stein. Like Blessed Franz.

The question is: How do we come to believe? How do we bring others to this faith?

Again, we need to let Emmaus guide us. Notice where Christ begins. With the Scriptures. “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”

In other words, he taught them that his voice speaks in all of the Scriptures. He taught that he is the fulfillment of God’s plan for history and for every human life.

St. Gregory the Great said: “Scripture is a letter from God almighty to his creature. In it we come to know God’s heart through God’s words.”

That’s how we have to read the Scriptures, my friends. “Not as the word of men but as what it really is—the Word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13). We are to read Scripture as a dialogue between our hearts and the heart of God.

This is how all the saints read Scripture—as a letter written personally to them. There are so many stories of saints whose lives were changed by their encounter with the living Christ in sacred Scripture. Think of St. Augustine, St. Anthony, the first Christian monk, St. Francis of Assisi.

One of my favorite stories is about Thérèse of Lisieux. We all know about her beautiful vow—“In the heart of the Church, I will be love.” But do we remember how she came to make that vow? It was by a fervent and prayerful reading of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13.

Thérèse said she read the Bible like Mary Magdalene peering into the entrance of the empty tomb. That’s how we should read Scripture too. We too should be seeking the one we love, the risen Lord in the pages of sacred Scripture. We should be seeking to know the heart of Christ and his will for our lives.

That means we need to let Scripture probe our hearts and examine our consciences. St. Paul said the word of God is living and active, like a two-edged sword that pierces the heart and reveals our thoughts and intentions (Heb. 4:12).

This is what happens to the disciples at Emmaus. They say to each other: “Did not our hearts burn within us while . . . he opened to us the Scriptures?”

The Word of God, the encounter with Christ, should make our hearts burn with the desire for conversion. With the desire to burn off all our bad habits and worldly ways of thinking. With the desire for a truly interior life. For a life that’s more than just a surface existence. For a life that’s lived in the presence of God. In a deep, personal relationship with our Lord.

Again we see this happening at Emmaus. After Christ opens the Scriptures for them, the two disciples ask: “Stay with us.”

These are words of conversion. The response of the obedience of faith. They have heard the good news. Jesus has opened the Scriptures for them. And they respond with words of faith. “Stay with us.” He has come into their lives and they don’t ever want him to leave.

This too is written for us, my friends. We must ask the Lord to stay with us. We must give our lives to him. We must abide with him and let his Word abide in us (John 15:7).

Now, how does Jesus respond? How does he abide or stay with us? Notice what happens next in our story at Emmaus.

Jesus sits down with them at the table. He takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Jesus does the same thing at Emmaus that he does at the Last Supper. At the Last Supper we find the same words in the same order. *At table, Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives* the bread to his disciples (Luke 22:14-20).

This tells us a lot. It tells us that Scripture is meant to lead us to the table of the Lord. To the Eucharist. To the sacraments of the Church. In the Eucharist the story of salvation history continues. The Word of God is made present in our midst.

All the promises of Scripture lead us to the Eucharist. What the Scriptures proclaim, the liturgy makes real—the communion of God and his children. And in the Eucharist, the disciples recognize Christ. Luke says they know him “in the breaking of the bread”—which is what the early Church used to call the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist, we abide in the Word and the Word abides in us. We experience what St. Paul experienced. Remember what he said: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

This is the goal of the life of faith, my friends. This is the goal that sacred Scripture seeks to lead us to. This is what we were made for. To live by faith in the Son of God. Who loved each one of us, and gave himself up for us on the cross. We are called to live in true communion with him. *Not I, but Christ living in me.*

Now there is one more thing to say before we finish our Bible study. What happened after the disciples came to know Jesus in the breaking of the bread?

Immediately they rise and go to the apostles. To the Church. The Church to which Christ entrusted the Scriptures and the Eucharist.

This tells us that our faith in the risen Christ is not meant to be lived alone. We must live in the community of disciples. In the family of God. In the Church. My brothers and sisters: We can never separate Christ from his Church! Or his Word from his Sacraments! Christ has put these things together to fulfill his promise: that he would be with us until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

And Christ gave his Church a mission. Christ wants all of us—his Church—to proclaim the gospel of reconciliation. To tell the story of God’s love and mercy to everyone. Everywhere. To the ends of the earth. He said: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . Teaching them” (Matt. 28:19–20).

Those were Christ’s last words to his apostles. They are the first words he speaks to us, his disciples.

We are to be disciples. Students of Christ. And we are to be *teachers of Christ* to every one we meet. In everything we do. Inside and outside of the classroom. As Blessed Franz said, every moment can be put to good use for eternity.

That’s why the disciples at Emmaus immediately went off to tell everyone of their encounter with Christ.

Jesus said he came to “cast fire upon the earth” (Luke 12:49). This is the fire that the disciples felt at Emmaus. The fire of repentance and conversion.

The living Christ wants to start that fire in the hearts of every man and woman. He wants to inflame our hearts with the love of God. With the thirst to know him and to love him ever more deeply.

With the zeal to bring other souls to love him too. With fervor to share his love with others.

Let us then go out and teach Christ with our lives. Like all the saints who have gone before us. Let us walk with the men and women of our day on the road of life. Drawing near to them and speaking to them about our friendship with Jesus. Let us help them to know Jesus as their friend. Let them know that if they follow Jesus, he will make this world for them a pathway to eternity.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today.

I pray that like the first disciples, you will “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, [and] teach one another in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16).

And I ask that Blessed Franz and Our Lady of Guadalupe guide us as we seek always to be better disciples and better teachers of Christ.