

Why People Are Leaving the Church and What the Church Is Doing About It

Address to a Meeting of “Theology on Tap”

Blue Star Brewery
San Antonio, Texas
October 4, 2007

The Most Rev. José H. Gomez, S.T.D.
Archbishop of San Antonio

¡Saludos, mis hermanos y hermanas! Greetings, my brothers and sisters!

It's so good to be with you again! Thank you for this chance to talk with you tonight about such an important topic.

Some people have labeled our topic tonight as the problem of “empty pews.” That's a catchy phrase. It's very visual. But there's a risk with that kind of phrase. The risk that we trivialize the issue. Or that we'll forget that what we're talking about is a very sad reality. A tragedy really.

Because when we talk about empty pews, it's not like we're talking about empty bleachers. Or not enough fans coming out to the ballpark. We're not talking about people quitting some club or organization they belong to.

We're talking about the Church and the Eucharist. The mystery of faith. We're talking about some of our brothers and sisters choosing, for many complicated reasons, to withdraw themselves from communion with the body of Jesus Christ. The bread of life. The food that he makes of himself to feed our hunger for God.

But before we start talking about these very serious questions, I want to say a few words to you about Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

I'm sure you noticed that she's been in the news a lot recently. She even made the cover of *Time* magazine. Last month marked the 10th anniversary of her death. And a new book came out. It's called "Come Be My Light." It's mostly a collection of private letters she sent to her spiritual directors over the years.

Many people were shocked by the contents of these letters. The letters reveal that for almost 50 years—until the day she died—Mother Teresa was in a kind of private spiritual agony. She suffered an overwhelming sense of God's absence. She couldn't feel the love of God. No matter how hard she tried. No matter how much she desired it.

I want to read you one passage from these letters, just to give you the flavor. She wrote this in 1957: "Where I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. . . . I am told that God lives in me, and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul."

What makes these letters so disturbing is that we remember her beautiful witness to the love of God. The way she was always smiling. Her selfless love for the poor, the dying, and the unborn. We think about all the beautiful lessons she gave us about finding Christ in the poor and in the Eucharist.

She did all these great, heroic things in the world. She prayed and sacrificed and gave her life for Jesus. And all the time she was in anguish and torment inside.

Mother Teresa went through what mystics and spiritual writers call “the dark night of the senses” or the “dark night of the soul.”

That’s a time in the interior life when persons can’t feel the love of God. When they don’t get anything out of prayer or the Mass. When the truths of the faith don’t stir their souls. When the reality of Christ no longer seizes them.

This dark night is a scary place to be. And Mother Teresa was in that place for a long time. Longer, probably, than any other saint in history ever experienced a “dark night of the soul.”

The question is: *Why?*

I think part of the answer has to do with the subject we’re here to talk about tonight.

Mother Teresa was made to experience—in a profound and intense way—what a lot of our brothers and sisters in the world are going through today.

She was made to experience what it feels like to live without God. To feel that God doesn’t exist. That God doesn’t care.

This is one of the mysteries of the saints, my friends! Each saint is sent by God for a special reason—to show people how to be holy. How to live like Christ in their own time and place. Every saint is a kind of divine response to the “signs of the times” that the saint is living in.

Now, one of the signs of *our* times is this widespread darkness of unbelief, this crisis of faith. The reality of “empty pews” is a part of this crisis of faith.

One of Mother Teresa’s missions was to show us how to follow Christ in this time of darkness. In this time when many people find

it very hard to believe in the love of God. You should learn more about Mother Teresa. You should have a devotion to her. She is a great saint for our times.

And make no mistake, my friends—these are hard times to believe in. Think of the century that just passed. The century that Mother Teresa lived through. The century that all of us were born in.

It was a century of two world wars. There were genocides, ethnic cleansings, the Holocaust. The brutality of communism. Not far from here, just across the border in my home country of Mexico, the government persecuted the Church for more than 20 years—killing thousands of priests and nuns, laymen and lay women. All for one reason: to create an atheistic state, a state without God. This happened in countries all over the world. In some countries this is still going on.

These are still very hard times for many people to believe in. We have terrorism. We have “holy war.” We have oppression and injustice. Innocent suffering. Natural disasters like the flood that destroyed New Orleans.

A lot of our brothers and sisters can't believe that a good God could let such things happen. For the first time in history, many people around the world, even many people in our own country, don't believe in God. Or in any higher power or spiritual reality beyond this world. Many of our brothers and sisters now live as if God does not exist.

Part of our mission as Christians is to talk to these people. To be their friends. We need to show them, through our reason and through our faith, all the signs of God's love in the world.

But I bring these things up tonight because this is the “big picture” of the times we're living in. We need to keep that big picture in

mind. Because when we talk about “empty pews” we’re talking about one part of this larger crisis of faith.

Sure, people have a lot of specific reasons and explanations for why they stop going to Church. I’ve heard a lot of them. I know you have, too.

I hear some people who say they don’t get anything out of Mass. That it’s boring or that it doesn’t “move” them. So they stop going. Some people leave the Church because they think it’s behind the times or out of touch with the world today. Others I’ve heard say that they don’t like all the hierarchy and all the rules. They disagree with specific teachings.

I respect these complaints. They’re often very sincere. We have to always have our arms open to our brothers and sisters who’ve fallen away. We have to talk to them about why they’re leaving. And we have to always be inviting them back.

But we have to make sure we’re talking about the right things. And I don’t think the reasons people give for leaving the Church are always the *true* or the real reasons. It’s not that people are lying. I don’t think they themselves understand the real reasons for their disappointment with the Church.

The real reason people leave the Catholic Church is a loss of faith. For whatever reason, they find themselves no longer able to believe that Jesus Christ is who he said he was. They find they can no longer believe the Catholic Church is what Jesus Christ founded it to be. And they find they can no longer believe in the Eucharist as Jesus Christ taught it.

If the Mass is “boring,” it’s because we’ve forgotten what the Mass is.

The Mass is heaven and earth filled with the glory of God. In the Mass, we here on earth are united with the angels and saints in heaven in offering a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God our Father.

These aren't just words from a catechism. They are the mystery of faith. The highest reality. The deepest truth.

The Mass—every Mass—is a moment of transcendence. We are like Peter, James, and John when they saw our Lord transfigured on the mountain top. We see bread and wine become the body and blood of our Lord.

We don't think about these things enough, my friends! What a gift it is to be received at the altar of God! To have communion with the Creator of heaven and earth! This is the Eucharist. Every Eucharist.

St. Augustine once heard Christ tell him: "I am the food of the strong. Grow and you shall feed on me. But you shall not change me, like the food of your flesh, into yourself. But you shall be changed into my likeness."

Every Mass, every time we take Communion, we have the chance to grow more like Christ. To be changed more into his likeness. That's why we go to Mass. To thank God for our salvation. To become what St. Peter called "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).

We can be like Jesus. We can be so close to Jesus that we feel his life in us in everything we do. This is the mystery of the Mass. This is why it's such a tragedy when people stop going to church.

St. Paul talked about the Eucharist this way. He said: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now

live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

If the Mass is boring to some people, or they’re not getting anything out of it, there are some things we can do as a Church. But the answer is not to change the Mass so that it’s more like a Protestant service. The answer is for us to always celebrate the Mass with greater intensity, reverence, beauty, and prayer.

The key is faith. We have to live by faith. By faith that Jesus is who he said he was—the Son of God. By faith that he is the Christ. The Messiah that God promised to his chosen people. By faith that he loves *me* and *you*. By faith that he gave himself up to death on the cross for each one of us. Because he *loves* us.

If we don’t believe these things, the Mass won’t make any sense. It will just be an empty ritual.

Why are people leaving the Church? At the heart of it is “a crisis of faith in Christ.” Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has said this.

People leave the Church because they no longer believe that Jesus is our Savior or the Lord. Or that he alone reveals to us the face of the Father.

And we see that a lot, don’t we? People talk about Jesus as a wise man, a great teacher, a kind of guru. But they don’t talk about him as if he is the Son of God who will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Pope Benedict says that people today want to remake Jesus in their own image. He says they want “a Jesus who demands nothing, never scolds, who accepts everyone and everything, who no longer does anything but affirms us.”

I think the Pope's right about this. This is a real problem. And when people don't believe the right things about Jesus, they are going to wind up with false beliefs about the Church.

Because the Church is not just a voluntary association or some organization with its own by-laws and arbitrary rules.

The Church is the voice of Christ. "He who hears you, hears me" (Luke 10:16). That's what he told his apostles, the first bishops. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. What you bind on earth will be bound in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). That's what he told Peter, the first pope. "I will send you the Spirit and he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). That means that when the Church teaches, it teaches what Christ wants it to teach. With the assurance of the Holy Spirit.

So the Church can't ever be separated from Christ. The Church is Christ's body on earth. He promised to be with his Church until the close of the age (Matt. 28:20).

You can't leave the Church without leaving Christ. That's why we have to bring our brothers and sisters back to the Church. We must bring them back to Christ.

Ok. I've tried to answer your question about why people are leaving the Church. I believe the root cause is a crisis of belief. Now, about your next question: What's the Church doing about it?

When I hear that question, it seems to imply that you think the Church is *me*. That is, that the Church is the hierarchy and the priests and the nuns and the professionals who work in our parishes and chancery offices. That's part of the Church. But the Church is you, too. It is all of us joined to Jesus.

When Paul was persecuting the Church, killing Christians, Christ appeared to him and said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5).

Again, we see that Christ can’t be separated from the Church. And we see that each believer is a part of the Church.

Then the question becomes: What are *you* doing about people leaving the Church? What are we doing about it together?

As you all know, we’ve just celebrated the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II’s visit to San Antonio.

One of his big themes during that visit was the need for a new evangelization of our nation. In a special way, John Paul called us to reach out “to those brothers and sisters in the faith who have drifted away because of indifference or who have been hurt in some way.”

So our topic tonight was very much on John Paul’s mind when he was here. And I think his approach is the right one. We have to see ourselves as missionaries. As evangelists. Every one of us has been given a mission by Christ, a purpose in God’s plan.

If you want some homework, go home tonight and read the first chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. And when you read it, know that every time Paul uses the words “us” or “we,” he is talking about you. And me.

What Paul says is that before the foundation of the world, God had a plan for each of our lives. We were chosen. Every one of us. Destined to be his sons and daughters. The purpose of our lives is to be holy and to praise God. And we are called to help God in his plan for the world—which is to unite all peoples and all things in Christ.

Jesus said it a little more simply. He said we have to preach his gospel to the ends of the earth. That we have to make disciples of all nations. In other words: we have to be evangelists. Missionaries.

The first missionaries to America learned everything they could about the native languages, customs, and religious traditions. They worked hard to “inculturate” the gospel. To make it take root in society. In the way of life. In the culture of the people.

They used music and songs. Art and writing. They got involved in the local communities. They helped the people set up farms and raise livestock. They were educators, healers, and peacemakers. In everything they proclaimed the gospel. They showed their love of God through their love of their neighbor.

The Church today needs to be doing all these things, too. And that means more than just official Catholic sponsored media and programs. It means that each of you has to find ways to reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ.

We need to work harder to find a “language” that speaks to those who have drifted away. We need to find new “means” to reach out to them.

I think there are great possibilities for sharing the gospel through the new digital media technologies, especially the internet and things like “podcasts.” Already, many lay people are doing great things for the faith in this area.

We need to be always looking for new ways to bring the gospel to people. If we find people in a pub, then we should go to talk to them there! This series is a good, creative example of how to do the new evangelization.

But all our fine initiatives won't matter unless we ourselves are trying to live the gospel. We all need on-going conversion to Christ. Every day we need to turn our hearts back to God. To ask what his will is. To ask him for the grace to do his will in everything.

The first missionaries to this land—the people we owe our faith to—endured great sufferings and trials. And they did it all for the love of Christ and the love of their new neighbors in the new world.

I love these words from the French Jesuit, Paul Le Jeune, who evangelized Quebec and the North in the 1630s and 1640s. He wrote that his mission was “to render our America . . . wholly Christian, and [to] form a sanctuary out of a vast solitude, where the divine Majesty will find worshippers of every tongue and nation.”

What a beautiful mission statement. We should make it our own. Tomorrow when you get up, set your hearts to the task of making America Christian again. Of bringing people to Jesus from every tongue and nationality. This is a great thing to live for.

I started tonight with the story of a great missionary, Blessed Mother Teresa.

She spoke these words to you and me: “A missionary is one who is sent. God sent his Son. Today God sends us. Each one is sent by God and his Church. . . . Sent to bring his love and compassion among men.”

My friends, you have a great calling. Each one of you. You are messengers sent by God. Sent to bring the light of his love to our brothers and sisters who are lost in the darkness of unbelief.

I want to leave you tonight with the story of another great missionary. Do you know about Venerable Antonio Margil? He was the Franciscan priest who founded our Mission of San Jose here in San Antonio.

He evangelized all over the new world. Walking barefoot. Carrying just a walking stick, a prayer book, and the things he needed to say Mass. Sometimes he would walk 40 or 50 miles a day like that. He established missions in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, and here in Texas and Louisiana. His missions are still standing today, three centuries later.

Venerable Antonio faced constant violence and danger. He was ready to die for his faith, and on several occasions he almost did. But he continued on, he said: “For God and for the love of souls.”

He converted thousands. Not by skillful arguments. But by love. By the example and witness of his life. Let us have the same zeal to live for Christ. To bring other people to Christ.

I came across these lines recently from San Antonio de Padua, the patron saint of our diocese: “Language comes alive when it speaks by deeds. Enough of talking. Let actions speak.”

Enough of talking then, tonight! Let our actions speak, my friends. Let our actions always speak of our love for Jesus Christ!

I ask God’s blessings on all of you and your families. And I pray that Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of the Americas, will guide us in the new evangelization.