



‘In Due Season We Shall Reap, If We Do Not Lose Heart’

Address to
Orange County Catholic Prayer Breakfast

Crowne Plaza Anaheim Resort
Grove, California
November 21, 2008

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

Bishop Brown, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: I am delighted to be here. I'm grateful for Tim Busch's invitation, and for the work of Rob and Berni Neal, and everyone who helped to organize this important event.

Before I begin, I want to congratulate and thank you all for your heroic work on Proposition 8. It is a great sign of hope. And I pray that history will remember this as a historic turning point in our struggle to defend and proclaim the truth of God's plan for marriage and human sexuality.

We sure have been making a lot of history here in America this past month, haven't we?

A couple weeks ago, as I was watching the election returns, I had very vivid memories of the 1960 election, and the pride I felt when John F. Kennedy was elected. I was only 8 years old. But even the children knew that something important was happening, that a big barrier had been broken down. Finally, a Catholic could be President.

So I think we can appreciate the emotions being expressed by African Americans, Hispanics, and millions of Americans and people around the world. There is a powerful symbolism in Senator Obama's election as president.

Regardless of our political philosophies, we should all recognize this election as a sign of the great capacities for repentance, conversion, and renewal that are part of the American experiment in democratic government.

It is amazing to think—not more than a century-and-a-half ago, the U.S. Supreme Court denied the personhood of African Americans and their rights to liberty and citizenship. Today that Supreme Court decision is where it should be—in the dustbin of history, a shameful memory. And a black man is about to assume the highest office in the land.

A Christian, however, always has to see things in a broader lens. We have to look at things in light of the Gospel and the great plan of God for our salvation. In that plan there is not slave or free, Jew or Greek, black or white, male or female. All are children of God. The same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches on all (cf. Gal. 3:28; Rom. 10:12).

Now, there are still large issues related to this election that we need to talk about. But to begin

our time together I want to stay in this “historical” mode.

The election made me think of the story of another historic black man in our country. His name was Augustine Tolton. Most people, unfortunately, don’t remember him. But he made history, too. He was the first African American priest in America.

Like our president-elect, and President Lincoln, he had a connection to Springfield, Illinois. But he got there in a much different way.

Augustine Tolton was born a slave, in 1854. His mother and father were owned by Catholic families who lived on adjacent farms in Ralls County, Missouri.

Those were strange times, just before the Civil War, and it is easy to be judgmental, to feel superior. It is harder to try to understand and to see the connections with our own day.

These white Catholics bought and sold men, women, and children on auction blocks. Yet they cared somehow for their slaves’ eternal souls. They allowed them to be baptized and to partake of the sacraments. Augustine’s parents were married in a Catholic church, with their owners worshipping alongside them.

As a little boy, Augustine was worked year-round, day till night, in his master’s fields. They were rye fields, and the crop was sold for the making of whiskey. And the working conditions were awful. By the age of 7, Augustine’s back already bore permanent scars from the overseer’s lash.

His father escaped to fight in the Union Army. And some time later, Augustine’s mother, with their three children, including a 20-month-old baby, escaped too. She made a dangerous passage across the Mississippi River. In the middle of the night, across the wide, black river, she rowed an old boat to the shores of the free state of Illinois.

There is so much in Augustine Tolton’s biography that is inspiring and worth talking about. But I this morning I want to focus on one moment during his preparation for the priesthood. A German priest, Father Richardt, was teaching him philosophy. They were studying St. Thomas Aquinas’ theory of justice and natural rights.

The priest was telling him how Thomas taught that all people have God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Rights that no man can take away, and rights that every civilized society must respect.

Augustine responded to his teacher this way. If St. Thomas was right, he said, then blacks in America weren’t being treated with justice. Either that, he said, or “Negroes aren’t counted as people.”

What he wanted to know most, however, was how Catholics could participate in this injustice.

Even in the so-called free North, he had experienced the racist attitudes of his Catholic neighbors. He had been denied admission in Catholic schools, forced to sit in a back corner of churches at Sunday Mass. And Augustine wanted to know how Catholics could claim to believe in God and still behave that way.

It was a good question. And Father Richardt had a very wise answer. He said it with sadness: “The Church always stands for right and justice. Members of the Church, however, since they are human beings, often fall short of the ideals of the Christ and his Church” (Hemesath, *From Slave to Priest*, 111).

This story reminds me of another historic moment that happened in April this year—the first pastoral visit of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, to America.

When the Pope met with Bishop Brown and I and the other bishops from around the country in Washington, he raised the same basic question that Augustine Tolton raised.

The Pope said: “Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday, and then during the week ... to ignore or exploit the poor and the marginalized ... or to adopt positions that contradict the right to life of every human being from conception to natural death?”

That’s a good question, too. And it comes back to what Father Rickhardt told Augustine Tolton. The Church always teaches the commandments and truths of Jesus Christ. But sometimes there is a gap between those teachings and truths and the practice of individual Catholics.

Catholics were among those who owned slaves. The notorious Supreme Court decision, *Dred Scott v. Sanford*—which ruled that slaves were property not people—was written by a Catholic, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney.

Today everyone can look back and agree: people back then should have known better. What could they have possibly been thinking? What strong delusion had come over them? As I said: those were strange times, and it’s hard for us not to be judgmental, not to feel superior.

Yet, as Benedict noted, and as we all know: today there are many Catholics who are actively engaged at every level in defending the peculiar institution of abortion in this country. This, too, is a system that denies the fundamental liberties of a class of people. This, too, is a system that involves treating some persons as the property of others.

In the aftermath of the elections, there has been a lot of talk about the “Catholic vote.” I will leave it to sociologists, political party leaders, and pundits to decipher the statistics and figure out what it all means.

For me, the issue is very basic, my friends. To have a Catholic vote, we need to have Catholics voting. We need Catholics with a deep sense of their faith. Catholics who know and love Jesus Christ, and who want his kingdom to come and his will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We need Catholics who know the teachings of his Church. We need Catholics who have the

courage to live and defend the truths that Christ came into this world to die for.

This is easier said than done. You know that better than I do, because you face these challenges directly every day in your work, in your communities. It is not easy to keep the faith, especially as our society becomes aggressively more secular, more hostile to religious perspectives, and especially the moral witness of the Catholic Church.

Last week, Bishop Brown and I were on the other side of the country, for the meeting of the U.S. bishops' conference in Baltimore. And Cardinal George said something very important in his address to us. He said:

“We can also be truly grateful that our country’s social conscience has advanced to the point that Barack Obama was not asked to renounce his racial heritage in order to be president, as, effectively, John Kennedy was asked to promise that his Catholic faith would not influence his perspective and decisions as president a generation ago. . . . We are, perhaps, at a moment when, with the grace of God, all races are safely within the American consensus. We are not at the point, however, when Catholics, especially in public life, can be considered full partners in the American experience unless they are willing to put aside some fundamental Catholic teachings on a just moral and political order.”

Cardinal George was not making excuses for Catholics. Far from it. But he was acknowledging a significant reality in American public life. More and more, in order to participate in politics—whether as voters, politicians, or public servants—Catholics are asked to check their moral and religious beliefs at the door.

As Cardinal George indicated, this is a legacy of our country’s historic anti-Catholicism. We do tend to forget that groups like the KKK and the “Know-Nothings” were as anti-Catholic as they were racist. We tend to forget there was a time in this country when Catholics couldn’t hope to win a political office; when churches and convents were burned down, and priests were sometimes tarred and feathered.

Anti-Catholic bigotry is more subtle today. But it’s real. Today it is merged with an aggressive secularism that denies the legitimacy of any moral viewpoints based on religious beliefs.

To participate in our nation’s political discourse, Catholics and other believers are expected to accept the terms and assumptions of that discourse—namely, that talk of God and his law is irrelevant, and that our only legitimate goals should be related to making this world a better place for our brothers and sisters.

Of course, these are noble goals. We all want people to flourish and be happy. The problem is that our culture defines happiness and human flourishing in radically individualistic, materialistic, and “this-worldly” terms. This way of looking at the world forgets that men and women are creatures with souls as well as bodies, with spirits as well as material desires and needs.

But when Catholics talk about the “common good,” we can never forget the ultimate ends for which men and women are created. We are made for holiness and love, for life forever with God in heaven. That means we need to work for a society that provides for people’s needs in this world and helps them towards their ultimate destiny—life in the world to come.

The challenge we face in this historic moment, friends, is that some of our laws and many of the currents in our society, deny the God-given purpose and dignity of the human person. Some of these laws compel men and women to participate in what is intrinsically evil. Despite this fact, many of our fellow Catholics have chosen to follow the law of man rather than the law of God (cf. Acts 5:29).

If we are truly to build a just society, we must try to close this gap—between the truths of Christ, the teachings of his Church, and the beliefs and practices of individual Catholics. The gap between what Catholics profess on Sundays and how they live the rest of the week.

So how do we do this? I want to suggest that first and foremost, we must be the people we want our neighbors to be. Elegant proofs and reasoned arguments will only get us so far. We will change hearts and minds only if we ourselves become living examples of the Gospel we’re called to proclaim.

So the first thing we must do is rededicate ourselves to being men and women of virtue, to being faithful Catholics. This year, the Church is celebrating the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of St. Paul. And at the heart of Paul’s teaching is this idea that each of us is called to be a saint.

Paul used to say to everybody: This is God’s will for you—that you be sanctified, that you be a saint (cf. 1 Thess. 4:3). And he told us how to do this. He said: “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

It’s a simple and beautiful program: No matter what you have to do in the day, no matter how small your chore, you can do it for the love and glory of God.

Each of us must personally rediscover the power and beauty of our faith. And we need to share that power and beauty with our brothers and sisters. This is what God is asking of us at this historic hour. That we become *ambassadors of faith, heralds of hope, and messengers of love*.

To be *ambassadors of faith* means you must stand up against the forces of our secular society. Our society enforces a strict separation of faith from life. Friends, we must reject this mentality. Your faith is more than private prayer and personal devotion.

Your faith must illuminate everything you do. From how you love your spouses and raise your children, to how you run your businesses, to the kind of policies and politicians you support.

The truths of our faith are a challenge and a threat to many of the false values of our society. That's why our society is so concerned to keep religion out of the public square. But you are called to be men and women of faith. That means you can't accept any situation that would have you set aside the demands of Christ's Gospel or the teachings of his Church.

Promise yourself that you will never turn your back on Jesus or the truths he died to proclaim. Promise yourself that you will never ignore or contradict the teachings of his Church—either by your words or by your actions.

God still has something to say to this world that he created. This world he shed his own blood to redeem. And he wants to make his appeal to the world through you. Through the witness of your life.

My friends, you must also be *heralds of hope*.

Many of our brothers and sisters have accepted the lie that they don't need God to be happy. So they put their hope in things that can't last. They seek happiness in pleasures that will never satisfy. So many of them are like broken cups—desperately trying to fill themselves up, but never being able to.

You must talk to your neighbors about the great hope that is ours as children of God. Talk to them about heaven, about eternal life. Help them to understand that in Jesus they can know a love stronger than death.

Finally, my friends: You must be messengers of love. We can't say we love God if we aren't working to help our neighbors in need. We can't say we love our neighbors if we aren't willing to share with them the whole truth about God and the human person. The truth that will set them free.

To love God and to love our neighbor means telling the truth and being willing to sacrifice for that truth. The truth revealed by Jesus is that all human life is a sacred treasure. That each person is created in the image of God, and is desired by God, and loved by God. That each person has a purpose in God's plan.

Being a messenger of love means standing up to defend this truth whenever and wherever the image of God is being destroyed, threatened, mistreated, or abused.

My brothers and sisters: We face many challenges at this historic moment. Two wars, the continued threat of terrorism. A widening economic crisis, the persistence of poverty, and the urgent need for immigration reform.

As you know, despite the victory of Proposition 8 here, nationally we continue to face an assault on the God-given definitions of marriage and the family. And there are now two states in this country where doctors are required to help patients kill themselves if they ask for that "help."

But underlying these issues, we face a foundational injustice—the legalized homicide of the unborn. All our work for justice and the common good is vanity, so long as children waiting to be born are treated like property not people, to be disposed of as their “owners” see fit.

My brothers and sisters: At this historic moment, we see that as far as we have come, we have not come far enough.

Father Augustine Tolton was blessed to see the regime of slavery crumble in his lifetime. Despite the legacy of prejudice, he could preach with confidence that “God is over us all, and he has many blessings for men of every race” (Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, 155).

What we need now is to extend God’s blessings to unborn children of every race. To consign *Roe v. Wade* to a place alongside *Dred Scott* in the dustbin of history. To create an America where life is cherished and welcomed—from the child in the womb to the elderly and the handicapped, to the immigrant who comes to our land seeking a new life for his family.

We may not see these things in our lifetimes. But that can’t matter to us. Blessed Mother Teresa used to say that we are called—not to be successful, but to be faithful. And Jesus told us that one sows, that another might reap (cf. John 4:38).

So let us not grow weary of the struggle, my friends. For as St. Paul said, “in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart” (Gal. 6:9).

Let me leave you with that prayer. That you continue to be faithful. That you continue to sow the seeds of faith, hope, and love—that will bear fruit in the generations to come.

I thank you for this chance to speak with you. I pray that Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of America, intercede for you and your families and watch over you always.