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Keynote Address—National Catholic Prayer Breakfast

A Celebration of the Visit of Pope Benedict XVI To the United States
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These days - this extraordinary week - we are living in the heart of the Church. "Ubi Petrus; Ibi Ecclesia" **Where Peter is, There is the Church.** The Vicar of Jesus Christ is living and moving in our midst, in our country, and the talk around this breakfast table is rightfully about Pope Benedict XVI.

Though the venues are crowded and the security and waiting lines are significant, the response to the opportunity to see the Pope is nearly universal. One person told me, "It was electric to see the Holy Father and be in the crowd with him!"

Yes, The Holy Spirit works through this man, the Successor to Peter, in an extraordinary way. With you, I pray that his visit will have its full Providential impact as a moment of New Evangelization in our country.

What does Pope Benedict XVI, as Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth, bring to the United States and the United Nations? In the weeks and months ahead we will reread his words and understand his purpose more fully. But as I finalized these thoughts last week, I wanted to prepare for the visit of the Holy Father by taking a few cues from his writings and Papal ministry; not to anticipate what he might say, but rather to see what he has already been saying to us. How will the Pope convey the presence of Jesus Christ – the Way, the Truth, and the Life, in the space of these days?

The Pope is Vicar of Christ, the Way

In two encyclicals Pope Benedict has laid down reflections on Charity and Hope. In these letters the Pope brings the Petrine charism to bear on that which may be seen as a "Way," in Christ for our progress as a nation and world.

In *Deus Caritas Est, God is Love*, his encyclical on Christian love, he notes the substantive experience of Judaism and Christianity, and some other religions as well: God made man as the effusion of His love, and His relationship with His creatures is one of love. The fact that God is author of life and love signals man's infinite value and requires respect for individual human life from its beginning until its natural end. As important as the individual is, man's ultimate meaning is discovered in relationship. God's plan for humanity is revealed in the complementary fashioning and pairing of the man and the woman and their vocation to bear and nurture children.

Pope Benedict recently chose this theme of the family to guide his reflections for the 2008 New Year's World Day of Peace. Starting from the primacy of the family as the necessary unit of society, the Holy Father notes that this *Way* of love and mutual responsibility is fundamental to human nature. It cannot be ignored or set aside without obscuring the truth about man, and

weakening the very foundations of peace. *

Again and again Pope Benedict has stressed that when the revelation of this extraordinary love is experienced, it changes us – it makes possible a response, and this response is so significant as to constitute a new “way of life.” It is an interior way, and according to the Pope, this interior Way is manifested in at least two regards: First - we receive it interiorly as a law written on our human heart; and second - we live it or pass it on to society from within, as a leaven.**

In *Spe Salvi*, on Christian Hope, Pope Benedict looks at the substance of our faith, the most significant article being perhaps that Jesus Christ died, rose from the dead, and opened for us a path to eternal life. The Pope explains that this positive reality: that we have a future – an eternal future because of the Resurrection - is so powerful, that it is not just “informative,” but “performative.” It changes us from within and empowers us to act or *perform* differently.***

The pastoral visit of the Pope is a work of evangelization which flows from the experience of Jesus Christ which is capable of changing the way the world and our country “does business.” As **Vicar of “Christ the Way”** he addresses the meaning and dignity of the human person, the integrity and centrality of the family, the principles of justice, the value of peace, and the necessity of religious freedom, all through the lens of Christian love and hope.

His method is simple. He comes as an agent of quiet, interior transformation, looking for every tiny sign of hope, and knowing that the Gospel itself has power to save from within.

Pope Benedict XVI is the Vicar of Christ, the Truth

Our country’s primordial Declaration of Independence announces “self-evident” truths. But is it not clear that the very notion of objective and transcendent truth has lost its foundational place in our American culture? As the **Vicar of “Jesus Christ the Truth,”** Pope Benedict XVI comes with a well-established reputation as a teacher of doctrine, to a world which tends to be doctrineless and, indeed, antagonistic to doctrine.

The system of education in the United States, for example, has been deeply influenced over the last half-century by John Dewey’s rejection of the whole notion of liberal arts. His pragmatic “learn by doing” creed dismisses the discipline of academic subjects, the systematic study of art and literature, and even the use of classic books. Dewey argues that traditional notions of human nature, of the structure and process of democracy, and of the nature of truth itself have, in his words, retarded human progress and all must be reworked.****

The result of this wholesale suspicion and ultimate rejection of the substantive canon of human learning, which has been so widely embraced in both public and private schools, is that our schools are oriented almost exclusively toward measurable “outcomes,” instead of the intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation of the student.

In the legal sphere, our society has been similarly crippled by a neglect of the fundamental texts on which our country was founded. As the United States crossed into the 20th century, the dean of Harvard Law, Christopher Langdell posited a kind of Darwinism in jurisprudence whereby law must evolve. In a methodological shift, he recommended that students look at judges’ decisions rather than the Constitution. This case-law approach became prominent under Roscoe Pound, who served as Professor in four different law schools and Dean at both Harvard and Nebraska, influencing a whole generation of jurists. He promoted a sociological legal science, and helped to institutionalize a positivistic approach which displaced legal inter-

pretation. The new goal: to directly shape the development of society.*****

Within the Church itself, too often the important writings of the Second Vatican Council have been incompletely read or misappropriated. “The **Spirit** of Vatican II,” has been invoked as justification for both the neglect of tradition, as well as a creative evolution of liturgy and pastoral practice. In his letter accompanying the Motu Proprio *Summorum Pontificum*, on the use of the 1962 Roman Liturgy, Pope Benedict recalls the “hopes and confusion” that followed the Council, and the hurtful “deformations of the liturgy” that took place when “celebrations were not faithful to the prescriptions of the new Missal.”

The Holy Father comes before the world as herald of an immutable and transcendent reality. He dares to say, “There are truths. There is right and wrong, and it is written indelibly in the heart of man.” As **Vicar of “Christ the Truth”** he is charged to represent the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever. The truth of Jesus Christ is offered in the Way of love: not seeking to impose the Church’s faith upon others, but at the same time, not allowing God and Christ to be left aside.*****

If we, in the structures of our institutions and spheres of influence: schools, the courts and political life, journalism and communication, science, economy, and culture have been inclined to neglect or reject the cumulative wisdom of our human experience and the fundamental tenets of the natural law, in favor of an arbitrary and evolving set of choices, the Pope’s presence and words will offer us a grounding in principles of faith and human reason, and inspiration for embracing truth anew.

At the Mass of his inauguration three years ago, Pope Benedict reflected on his ministry as Chief Shepherd who, like St. Peter, is commanded by Christ to “Feed my sheep.” The Pope insisted “Loving means giving the sheep what is truly good, the nourishment of God’s truth, of God’s Word, ...”***** Accompanied by the power of the promised Holy Spirit, and speaking in the person of Jesus Christ, he will confirm the Church in the faith and desire to move the world toward the Father.

He is Vicar of Christ the Life

Some may be inclined to dismiss the challenges of the Catholic Pope to the world as inflexible or intolerant. They will perhaps urge him to be open-minded. Maybe they will lecture him on “civility” – very popular these days.

As successor to Peter, he is “rock,” and he is a living rock. He is **Vicar of “Christ the Life.”** At the Mass of his inauguration, the new Pope greeted the millions who were listening throughout the world, “The Church is alive! The Church is alive and we are seeing it... The Church is alive because Christ is alive, because He is truly risen.”

Time and again the Holy Father has shown a burning desire for unity: among Catholics, among Christians, between religions. But he does not wish merely to “make mankind happier by bringing religions together.” He offers rather an authentic ecumenism: which rests in the New Covenant established in the living and life-giving blood of Jesus Christ; and which alone perfectly fulfills the eternally valid covenant of Abraham.***** In whatever words he shares with us these days, the Pope will represent to Catholics, to other Christians, to the Jewish people and to all men and women, “believers and non-believers alike,” a living and life-changing proclamation.

When Pope Benedict preached to the young people of the world in Cologne in 2005, he described the salvation event, Christ's death and resurrection, as something so powerful that it could be compared to "inducing nuclear fission in the very heart of being." It is this victory of Christ, the Pope said, "the intimate explosion of good conquering evil, that triggers off the series of transformations that little by little will change the world."*****

It is fair to say that this conviction of the Pope is a helpful key for us in understanding his message. The Pope is full of hope because this change, which is "built into" the encounter with the living Christ, has already begun. The explosion has occurred and its saving effects are intended to fill the world. We must dare to hope that the presence of the Vicar of Christ these days in our country will be a vehicle for authentic moral conversion in individual hearts and for our culture.

Friends: these days, this extraordinary week, we are living in the heart of the Church. **Where Peter is - There is the Church.** Let us pray for the Shepherd and for the flock: that these will be days when the joy and power of the Risen Lord is released on the world, as the Vicar of Jesus Christ – the Way, the Truth, and the Life, comes to confirm us in our faith.

*Pope Benedict XVI, *World Peace Day Message*, January 1, 2008. no. 4

**Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*. no. 31

***Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no. 2

****Henry T. Edmundson, *John Dewey and the Decline of American Education*. ISI: Wilmington, 2006. p. 7.

*****David Barton, *Original Intent*. Wallbuilders:Aledo, 2005. p. 228)

******Deus Caritas Est*, no. 31

*****Pope Benedict XVI, *Mass for the Inauguration of the Pontificate*, April 24, 2005. St. Peter's Square cf. Stephen Pinnentel, "The Master Key: Pope Benedict XVI's Theology of Covenant." *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*. Oct., 2007. Pp. 16-20.

*****Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Cologne-Marienfield, XX WYD, August 21, 2005.