

APPENDIX

HOMILY AT THE OPENING MASS OF THE CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA CONVENTION JUNE 19TH, 1973

Over a quarter of a century ago, the *first* convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America was held in New York in this hotel. It opened with a Mass at which my predecessor, Cardinal Spellman, presided and his presence with the American Theologians of his day was a sign of his friendship as well as his encouragement and respect. I join you in the same spirit and I am pleased to welcome you to New York and to have the opportunity to offer this sacred liturgy with you.

It is good for us to be able to pray together. When we meet at Mass, we are reminded in a vivid way of the faith in Jesus Christ that binds us together and of the life of Christ that we share. We are also reminded of the need that we all have for God's help and guidance and for the intercession of his Son. We pray that our faith will grow deeper, and that our lives will be more like that of Christ; we ardently desire to bring his message of salvation to all his people, and we hope to work to spiritually transform the world that he has given us to live in. We can do none of these things without God's help. And so we pray for each other and with each other.

The Gospel reading of today's Mass has something special to say to us. It is so important for us to listen to God's Word and to ponder it. For, all of us, as men of faith, are listeners who must respond to God's Word; who must make it our own, and then share it with others. In this Gospel of St. Matthew, Jesus is making a plea for understanding and compassion, especially toward those we find hard to accept. He asks us to see them as our heavenly Father sees them, and to strive for that wholeness, that holiness, that perfection, that only God has in all its fullness.

This Gospel has something to say to us, because the last few years, with all their hope and promise, have also been difficult ones at times for theologians and difficult ones at times for bishops. They have been

difficult years for theologians because Vatican II and Pope Paul VI in his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam*, have invited us to undertake a vast reconsideration of all aspects of the Church's life and of the deeper meaning of Christ's revelation. The program for this meeting gives evidence of your attention to this challenge with studies on the Security of Faith, the Interpretation of Tradition, Priestly Identity, and the Petrine Office.

These years have been difficult also because all of us have been called upon to cast the light of revelation and faith on new situations that we did not face in the past. Again your program gives evidence of this as it ranges from Cosmic Evolution to the Theology of the Local Church—from the Role of Woman in Society and the Church, to Black Theology, to the Ethics of the Life Sciences. All this has happened suddenly and it has sometimes left us with more questions than answers.

But these have been difficult years for bishops also, since they must feed the flock of Christ with the truths that will bring them salvation, as St. Paul told the priests of Ephesus so long ago, and they must do this even in times of unsettling transition. The bishops must guide the people of God effectively toward living the life of Christ here and now—in a rapidly changing world—a world that challenges our spiritual values at every turn and frequently discards many of them lightly. In a pastoral way, they must help provide the structures that will enable the flock to be nourished—and the Christian life to be lived more richly—at a time when some of the structures we used in the past no longer function as they once did.

It should not surprise us that even though there can be no ultimate contradiction between the goals of Catholic theologians and bishops—any more than between faith and reason—there is still ample room for real or apparent conflict as they pursue their specific aims intensely. We have lived through this experience but there is no sure sign yet that it is at an end.

The recent document on the Catholic University in the Modern World comes to grips with this question and we can make our own its comments and its call to mutual cooperation. "It is the theologian's task to deepen the understanding of that faith which he shares and professes with all the people of God, to study its sources and impli-

cations, and to seek to express it in a way that is adapted to the needs of his times. In doing this, the theologian makes his special competence available to the magisterium, while recognizing the latter's right to judge the value of his theology, its authentic catholicity, and its conformity with divine revelation."

"This dialogue between theologians and the hierarchy demands truth and sincerity from both parties, in a mutual love of Christ and a common desire to hand on his saving message."

What we need at this moment in history is easier to describe than it is to achieve. We need devotion to the message and the life and the person of Christ, as the source of redemption for all his people. This Mass is a celebration of his life and teaching and person. We need devotion to the Church as mediator of that message and that life and as the place where we encounter him. We are here now because we belong to the Church and because we want to belong. We need collaboration on the many specific problems we share—and our collaboration in prayer, in union with the prayer of Jesus, is always a forward step toward that. We need respect for the variety of roles that Christ has given us in the Church of God, and on understanding that fidelity to those roles may call for criticism on the one side so that part of the message is not obscured, or for firm pastoral concern on the other so that the faithful are really fed with the truths of salvation and not left hungry. And we need a spirit of humble service because our message is not our own, but that of Jesus—and our success depends partly on our words, and completely on his grace. Humble service may be asking much of us, but St. Paul gave us a reason for it in today's reading, in asking the Corinthians to remember "the favor shown you by our Lord Jesus Christ: how for your sake he made himself poor though he was rich, so that you might become rich by his poverty." The Mass is our celebration of Jesus' complete offering of himself to the Father "for us and for our salvation" and it is his invitation to us to unite with him and with each other in making the same offering.

My prayer for us at this Mass is that your convention will be a blessing for all of you, for those to whom you minister, for the church in New York and throughout our country, for all the people for whom God himself chose to be born of the Virgin Mary, to live and to teach, to suffer and die, to rise from the dead and to remain present in our

midst. St. Paul said it better in today's reading: "That just as you are rich in every respect, in faith and discourse, in knowledge, in total concern, and in our love for you, you may also abound in this charity." Amen.

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