



PAUL OF TARSUS: THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

A conference on Saint Paul's faith and his unique role in the diffusion of Christianity

Speakers: Msgr. Lorenzo ALBACETE – Theologian, Author, Columnist
Fr. Peter CAMERON—Editor-in-Chief of *Magnificat*
Archbishop Charles CHAPUT—Archbishop of Denver

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Paredes: On behalf of the Reverend Dr. R. Lamar Vest, President and CEO of the American Bible Society, I am delighted to welcome you all, and a most special welcome to His Excellency, the Papal Representative to the United Nations, Archbishop Celestino Migliore. Thank you for being here. His Excellency, Bishop Octavio Cisneros, Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of Brooklyn, thank you. And His Excellency to be, Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, and Fr. Peter Cameron, thank you for coming to our house and being with us. And most especially I would like to welcome the members of the Board of Trustees of the American Bible Society that are members of our Catholic faith—Sr. Joan Curtin, she's with us from the Archdiocese of New York. She is the head of the Catechetical Office. And Fr. Robert Robbins who is the pastor of the Holy Family Church and in charge of the Ecumenism in the Archdiocese of New York. Thank you for being here. And finally I am delighted to welcome the members of Crossroads Cultural Center. I am grateful to Angelo Sala for partnering with ABS in presenting the Saint Paul lecture series to mark the jubilee year of the great apostle Paul commemorating the 2000th anniversary of his birth.

Since 1816, ABS has pioneered a way of providing God's Word to people around the world who need it most. The focus of our Bible ministry is centered on four areas: Meaning, which advocates the life-changing message of God's Word; outreach, which provides Bible ministry alongside critical care for people struggling with crisis, disasters, poverty and injustice; supply, which places the Bible into the hands and hearts of people; and translations which opens the Bible to the 300 million people for whom God's Word is not yet available in their native language.

My dear friends, in other words, the only business in this historical house is the Bible, the Word of God. Our mission is to make the Bible available in all manners and forms by contributing to humanizing our society.

It is my privilege at this time to present to you Ms. Rita Simmonds who will speak on behalf of the Crossroads Cultural Center.

Simmonds: Good evening. On behalf of Crossroads I would like to thank The American Bible Society and Mr. Mario Paredes, who is also a member of Crossroads' Advisory Board, as well as our very distinguished guests. As a way of introduction, let us recall very briefly some comments that the Pope himself made in his Homily for the inauguration of the Pauline year on June 28, the feast day of St. Peter and St. Paul. Quoting the second chapter of the letter to the Galatians, Benedict XVI pointed out that Paul's faith coincides with "the experience of being loved by Jesus Christ in a very personal way. It is awareness of the fact that Christ did not face death for something anonymous but rather for love of him - of Paul [...] Paul's faith is being struck by the love of Jesus Christ, a love that overwhelms him to his depths and transforms him. His faith is not a theory, an opinion about God and the world. His faith is the impact of God's love in his heart. Thus, this same faith was love for Jesus Christ."

We believe that these words by the Pope are very significant for our current predicament as Christians in front of a culture that often tries to deny or reduce the content of our faith. It is not by chance that so many people who have desired to question the truth of Christianity over the last two centuries have started by trying to separate Jesus and Paul. Often St. Paul has been described as the first "ideologue" of Christianity, the man who took the teachings of Jesus and turned them into a doctrine, a systematic religious theory. As the Pope points out, nothing is further from the truth because St. Paul is all about Jesus; he is all about something that happened to him unexpectedly, something that happened "before." He was surprised by a love that he neither knew nor expected.

By organizing this presentation we would like to suggest that St. Paul's experience points to something truly crucial for our own faith and for the presence of the Church in today's society. And to guide us tonight, alongside Monsignor Albacete and Father Peter Cameron, who are both also members of the Crossroads' Advisory Board, we are very honored to have here with us one of the most distinguished members of our episcopate, Archbishop Chaput. I now leave to Monsignor Albacete the task of introducing our first speaker, Father Peter Cameron, and starting the conference.

Albacete: Fr. Peter John Cameron is a Dominican priest and the editor-in-chief of *Magnificat*. What is the circulation of *Magnificat*?

Cameron: 225,000

Albacete: That's awesome! He is the artistic director of the New York based Blackfriars Repertory Theatre, and the director of preaching for his province. His new book *Why Preach: Encountering Christ in God's Word* was just published by Ignatius Press. And he is also the editor of *Praying with Saint Paul*. I cannot begin to capture the experience of knowing Fr. Peter. So go ahead, talk to us.

Cameron: Thank you, Msgr., and it's a great honor to be here with you, Archbishop Chaput.

Why was Saint Paul's conversion to Christianity so instantaneous? Up until that moment, Saul's fanatical efforts at "persecuting the Church of God" (1 Cor 15:9) really went beyond anything we can imagine. The Acts of the Apostles describes Saul as one who was "breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). Paul accuses himself of being an accomplice in the murder of the martyr Saint Stephen (Acts 8:1; 22:20). He is quoted as saying in Acts 26 (v. 11), "I was so enraged against [the disciples of Christ] that I pursued them even to foreign cities." He is described as one who "ravaged those who call upon [Jesus'] name" (Acts 9:21). Paul confesses to Jesus himself, "I used to imprison and beat those who believed in you" (Acts 22:19). He says, "I persecuted the Church of God *beyond measure* and tried to destroy it" (Gal 1:13).

In other words, Saul was a person intent on systematically exterminating an entire category of human beings. Does that remind you of anyone?

And yet, on the road to Damascus when Jesus appeared to him, Saul *immediately* became a follower of Jesus Christ. Why? What convinced him? What would convince you?

As a good "Pharisee, the son of Pharisees" (Acts 23:6), a major portion of Saul's day would have been devoted to prayer. A staple of that daily prayer would have been the Psalms—he probably even knew them by heart. In his recitation of the Psalms, Saul would have begged God with these words:

O God, you are my God—for you I long! For you my body yearns (Ps 63:2, 4).... I am weary with crying out (Ps 69:4).... "Come," says my heart, "seek God's face"; your face, Lord, do I seek! Do not hide your face from

me (Ps 27:8-9)... O Lord, let your face shine upon us (Ps 80:4)... Do not stay far from me (Ps 22:12)... Lord, incline your heavens and come; reach out your hand from on high (Ps 144:5, 7).

Paul began to believe in Jesus Christ without hesitation because, in the encounter on the road to Damascus, Paul saw the face and heard the voice he had been begging for all his life. His faith sprang up because of the *correspondence* between the deepest longings of his human heart and the exceptional Presence he encountered in Jesus Christ. And the expectation in his heart told him that this Man was the one he had been waiting for all his life. Faith is acknowledging an exceptional Presence that changes you.

The correspondence Paul experienced extended even to the most picayune details of Saul's conversion. In Psalm 144 (vv. 6-7), the Psalmist pleads, "Flash your lightning and reach out your hand". And in the encounter on the road to Damascus, that is *exactly* what Christ made happen: Acts says, "A light from the sky suddenly flashed around him.... [Men] led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus" (Acts 9:3, 8).

It is not a coincidence that Paul's conversion story is recounted *three times* in the Acts of the Apostles...and each version contains different details. Why this repetition? Because if we want to understand Saint Paul...if we want to be so bold even to *follow* Saint Paul, then we must look at *What Comes Before*. And that is what Saint Paul constantly puts in front of us. So, in Acts 22, when a rioting mob in Jerusalem wants to rip Paul to pieces, what does he do? He recounts his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. In Acts 26, when Paul—now a prisoner on his way to Rome—has the chance to testify before King Agrippa, what does he do? He recounts his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. And how does Agrippa respond? He says, "If I don't watch out, then in a short time you are going to make me a Christian."

I have a theory that, after Ananias went to Paul and restored his eyesight and baptized him, Paul made Ananias take him out to the place on the road to Damascus where his conversion happened. I think Paul scooped up some of the dirt from the road and kept it with him as a kind of relic, and then, each day when he got out of bed, he sprinkled some of the dirt on his bedroom floor and fell on it all over again every morning. Because Paul wanted to re-live that Event of meeting Jesus Christ every day of his life. And he wanted us to enter into that Encounter with him.

That is why he wrote his letters. A scholar of Saint Paul named Gunther Bornkamm makes the point that Paul was the one who *created* the primitive Christian genre of letters—it was Saint Paul's unique innovation in the diffusion of Christianity. And why exactly are letters so crucial as a means of generating the faith? Bornkamm says that through Paul's letters, "we become *eyewitnesses of an encounter*, partners in that original conversation. We, too," he says, "are addressed, questioned, and appealed to."

The Scripture scholar Fr. Joseph Fitzmyer picks up on this. He says that Paul's interest didn't lie "in minutiae about Jesus' manner of life, his ministry, his personality, *or even his message*." And Fitzmyer is right: Where do you find the "message" of Jesus in the letters of Saint Paul? Rather, Fitzmyer says, Paul's interest was "in the *climactic events* of Jesus' life."

Of course, Saint Paul preached. But *what* did Paul preach? Not a concept, not a theory, not an idea, not a message. Saint Paul preached "the name of Jesus" (e.g., Acts 9:27, 28). That is, he preached his *friendship* with Jesus Christ. He preached the PERSON who had sought him out *personally*, who called him by name *personally*, who said to him *personally*, "I appoint you as a servant and witness of what you have seen of me"(Acts 26:16-18).

And what exactly had Paul "seen of Jesus?" There is something extremely strange about the writings of Saint Paul. If the New Testament was destined to contain a great hymn to charity in the New Testament, wouldn't you think it would be written by the incomparable mystical poet Saint John—the *beloved* disciple, the one who

leaned close on Jesus' chest at the Last Supper? But it wasn't; it was written by Saint Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13. And let me ask you something: Have you *ever* in your life been to a Christian wedding where 1 Corinthians 13 was *not* read?

But how exactly did the world's expert hater ever become the all-time, definitive, unsurpassed authority on love? It is because Saint Paul knew what Saint John knew: that God is Love. So when Saint Paul writes that "love is patient, love is kind," he is asserting that *God* is patient; God is kind. Paul can profess that "love is not jealous, it is not pompous, it is not inflated" because *God* is none of those things, and because, as Saint Paul says in the letter to the Romans, "the love of God has been poured out into our hearts" (Rom 8:5), Paul is no longer jealous or pompous or inflated. "Love is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury." Paul used to be all those things to the most extreme degree...but he is no longer. Love changed him. In short, what Paul is proclaiming in his great hymn to charity is: "If you want to know what love is, look at me! Look at what I have seen of Jesus. Look at the difference that love has made in me! Christ has made me a New Creation!"

In introducing the great hymn to love, notice what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:31. He doesn't say: I will show you a still more excellent concept, or theory, or program, or idea. He says I will show you a still more excellent *way*. And the word for "way" in Greek is *hodos*, which means a physical path or trail or road (it's the root of the word "method"). The more excellent way that Saint Paul shows us *is the road to Damascus* where Love reveals itself in the flesh and transforms our life—it is the method of encounter

That is why Saint Paul can say some six times in his letters, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ" (1 Cor 11:1; 1 Cor 4:16; Eph 5:1; Phil 3:17; 2 Thes 3:7; 2 Thes 3:9). He means: "Don't look at my virtues or my vices; don't look at my strengths or my weaknesses. Just follow the way that I keep on handing myself over to Jesus Christ the way that he hands himself over to me. That is all that matters in life. For me to live is Christ (Phil 1:21). Let what happened to me happen to you!"

It is not an accident that, from the moment Paul was converted, he was never alone again in his life. If you have a free afternoon some time, just try to count the number of all the many companions who accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys. Why was companionship so crucial to Paul of Tarsus? Because it was in that companionship that Paul continued to experience the encounter with Jesus Christ—the companionship that is the Church.

There's a bizarre story in Acts 16 (vv. 25-34) about Paul being thrown in prison with Silas. You can read the reasons for yourself. But Acts says that about midnight there was a severe earthquake that shook the foundations of the jail. All the doors flew open, and the chains of all the prisoners were pulled loose. When the jailer saw this, he pulled out his sword to kill himself. But Paul shouted out to him, "Do no harm to yourself; we are all here." Why didn't Paul escape when the jail doors flew open? Because Paul was not interested in "release"; he was interested in *freedom*. As he says in the letter to the Galatians, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free" (Gal 5:1). The jailer, and his entire family with him, were converted because Paul decided to stay in jail even when he was given a miraculous way out. *What made Paul stay in that jail is what made the jailer want to stay with Paul.*

We may say: Yes, this is all wonderful...but I don't think it's meant for me. If you only knew all my defects...all the problems I have to contend with...all the limitations and failings and ethical inadequacy in me, you wouldn't be wasting your time talking to me about Saint Paul's unique role in the diffusion of Christianity. And Saint Paul would respond: "As for your ethical inadequacy, let me say to you what I say in Romans 7:15: *Sometimes I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate.* And as far as problems and sufferings go, consider this:

Five times I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day on the deep; on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fastings, cold, and exposure (2 Cor 11:24-28).

Does anyone have a bigger list? Then ‘what will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? ... No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us’ (Rom 8:35, 37). ‘I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Cor 12:9-10). Why? Because my weakness makes me return to my encounter with Christ. And I experience that encounter with Christ whenever I remain attentive to his Presence in the companions that Christ puts on my path. And when I reach out my hand in my blindness and let myself be led by those Christ sends me, I become a “new creation” (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). And that New Creation is what we call the Church. Thank you.

Paredes: Thank you, Fr. Cameron. What a profound message! We truly value the work that you have presented to us.

It is my privilege to introduce to you Sr. Joan Curtin, the head of the Catechetical Office of the Archdiocese of New York and member of the Board of Trustees who will honor us by introducing our distinguished guest, Archbishop Chaput.

Curtin: It’s a privilege for me to introduce Archbishop Chaput to the group. Archbishop Charles J. Chaput is a member of the Capuchin branch of the Franciscan Order. He was born September 26, 1944, in Concordia, Kansas, the son of Joseph and Marian DeMarais Chaput. His father was a French Canadian, directly descended from King Louis IX, and his mother was a Native American. At a very young age Archbishop Chaput was enrolled in the tribe.

After earning a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from St. Fidelis College Seminary in Herman, Pennsylvania, in 1967, Archbishop Chaput completed Studies in Psychology at Catholic University in Washington D.C., in 1969. He earned a Master of Arts in Religious Education from Capuchin College in Washington D.C., in 1970 and was ordained to the priesthood on August 29, 1970.

Archbishop Chaput brings wide experience as a professor, spiritual director and administrator, having served as secretary, treasurer, director of communications and provincial minister of his province of the Capuchin Order. He has also served as pastor of Holy Cross Church in Thornton, Colorado.

The second priest of Native American ancestry to be ordained a bishop in the Catholic Church of the United States, Archbishop is the fourth and current Archbishop of Denver, having previously served as Bishop of Rapid City, South Dakota from 1988 to 1997, and I might add that he knew the sisters of our congregation who worked on the Pine Ridge Reservation there.

Archbishop Chaput is known for his deep spirituality, his wisdom, and his clear articulation of Catholic theology. He is a celebrated teacher, and to prove that, last Monday I believe over 200 young adults gathered for his presentation at Theology on Tap at a local restaurant and grill, and I heard it was a great success.

Please join me in welcoming to the American Bible Society Archbishop Chaput.

Chaput: Well thank you, Sister. Thank you, everyone. My dear brother bishops, I'm honored that you're here. My dear priests and deacons, fellow religious, sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ... I'm deeply grateful for the hospitality of the American Bible Society. I'm old enough to remember the days when we Catholics might not be part of this wonderful group, and it's a wonderful experience of hospitality and the presence of the Risen Christ in the Church today, so we're grateful for that. I'm grateful to the Crossroads Cultural Center for the invitation to be with you today. Fr. Peter John, I'm very happy to be a companion with you on the *way* that leads to Jesus who died and is risen from the dead. Your presentation was very creative and fresh, and we're all grateful for it.

The title of my address is "Thoughts on the Mission of Saint Paul." Let's start with the obvious: A really thorough discussion of St. Paul's mission, which is my theme today, would keep us here for a week. And then I'd never get invited back. And I love New York, so I want to be invited back. 31:52

So in speaking about Paul and the challenges he faced, I'll focus instead on one key question that my friend Mario Paredes suggested as a talking point: *What lessons can we learn from Paul about our own mission as Christians in today's society?*

It's a good question. Here's my answer: Very much like ourselves, Paul lived in complex times. Rome was the dominant superpower of the day. But the *Pax Romana* was a great deal messier and bloodier than our history books sometimes suggest. Yet Paul responded so well to the *demands* of his time because he had two extraordinary gifts. And we can cultivate those same gifts in ourselves today.

First, Paul was a man of his world in the best sense. He was educated, skilled and cosmopolitan. Unlike most Jews, he was also a Roman citizen. While he was rigorous in maintaining his Jewish identity, he also valued Roman learning and law. From the perspective of our 21st Century, he was a "man for all seasons." But Paul was also a man of *his own* season. In other words, he was a man with a keen grasp of his cultural circumstances -- a man with a shrewd understanding of his own people, of wider Roman society, and of the yearnings of the Mediterranean world.

Second, Paul was a man who deliberately and zealously committed himself to pursuing the truth. And he was prepared to pay -- as he finally did -- the ultimate price in pursuing the truth: his own martyrdom. Paul proclaimed his faith "in season and out of season." He was always ready to "convince, rebuke, exhort, [and] be unflinching in patience and in teaching" (2 Tim 4:2-3). He was willing to "fight the good fight" (1 Tim 1:18). He also had no fear of consequences, because "when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now" (1 Cor 4:12-13).

Paul was a determined man. As even St. Peter discovered, Paul never let shallow courtesies interfere with his witness for Jesus Christ. In fact, by today's standards, Paul's passion for Jesus borders on the unseemly. But of course, that says more about us than about him.

Now, why would Paul go to such extremes? There's a simple reason. Paul not only "knew" the truth as a collection of doctrines; he was *possessed* by the God of truth, who gives life to those doctrines. Because of this he could write: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Gal 2:20).

St. Augustine once summarized Paul's personality with this powerful phrase: *Cor Paoli, Cor Christi* -- "The heart of Paul is the heart of Christ." And of course he was right. There has never been, and there never will be, a greater missionary for Jesus than St. Paul. Through Paul, the Gospel reached the world. And our job as

believers today is to be Paul once again to the world around us. So starting from these two Pauline qualities – his keen sense of his times, and his intense zeal for the truth -- I'd like to make two simple points that may help us live out the example of St. Paul in our own lives.

Here's the first point: If we're serious when we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, then we need to understand our own times as well as Paul did his.

That's a lot easier said than done. Here's why. The tools we rely on to inform us, are the same tools we use to delude ourselves about the real world. The American news and entertainment media, which now so often overlap, are the largest catechetical syndicate in history. They teach us how to think and what to think about. But the culture they've helped to create – a culture based on immediacy, brevity, visual stimulation, celebrity and self-absorption – is very different from anything in our country's past. And that has very big implications not just for our democratic public life but for the Christian's place in American society.

We can't really know our times until we first know how our mass media work -- and especially *how they work on us*. A drunk can't get sober until he stops drinking. It's a good lesson to remember when we switch on the evening news. Obviously we can't turn our backs on TV, the internet and all the other information technologies that crowd into our lives. But we can learn to judge them soberly and critically. And if we don't, the consequences may be very unhappy.

The American Founding and all of our democratic institutions come from print-based patterns of thought. America is the child of book literacy, critical reasoning and one other key factor that I'll turn to in a moment. My point is this: The more sensory, immediate and emotional our culture becomes, the farther it gets from the habits of serious thought that sustain its ideals. And yet that's exactly what our mass media promote. Their profits *depend* on creating a constant spirit of urgency and change in their audience, a constant illusion of need that demands our attention. And what's the result? We become restless and stupid.

It's tempting to blame the media too harshly for this “dumbing-down” of American life. There's plenty of fair criticism we can point in their direction. But mainly we've done this to ourselves. If you take home just one suggestion from our time together tonight, let it be this: Get a copy of Daniel Boorstin's book, *The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream*, and read it. And then *think about it* -- with your computer, your television and your iPod turned off.

Boorstin was an accomplished historian and a former Librarian of Congress. He saw very clearly that there's a significant link between print culture and the foundations of American political life – a link too many people ignore. He wrote *The Image* in 1962, 48 years ago, with a growing worry about the direction of American culture. At the time, it was an important book. But it's even more important to reread it today. Listen to the first few sentences:

“In this book I describe the world of our making, how we [Americans] have used our wealth, our literacy, our technology and our progress to create the thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life. I recount historical forces which have given us unprecedented opportunity to deceive ourselves and to befog our experience.

“Of course, [American success] has provided the landscape and has given us the resources and opportunity for this feat of national self-hypnosis. But each of us individually provides the market and the demand for the illusions which flood our experience.

“We want and we believe these illusions because we suffer from extravagant expectations. We expect too much of the world. Our expectations are extravagant in the precise dictionary sense of the word – ‘going beyond the limits of reason or moderation.’ They are excessive.”

To put it another way: Our success as a nation made us greedy. Then greed made us stupid about who we are, what we deserve, what we can have -- and also blind to the human limits that we can't escape when we try to reshape our world. The writer Robert D. Kaplan once said that America has done so well for so long because her Founders had a tragic sense of history. In other words, they had a realistic grasp of human nature as a mix of nobility, weakness and flaws that need to be constrained. American ideals *require* a certain kind of citizen to make them work. Or as John Adams said, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

A moment ago I said that America is the child of book literacy, critical reasoning and one other key factor. I think you already know what that last factor is: religious faith. In writing about America at the beginning of the 19th Century, Alexis de Tocqueville saw two major features to American life: People were highly literate; and they practiced their Christian faith in a widespread, serious way. Intellect, *faith* and citizenship were closely tied. Together, and only because these factors reinforced each other, they made the new republic work.

Now, obviously Americans have always had *non-sectarian* public institutions. We've never had a nationally established Church, and that's a good thing. In principle, our country has always welcomed people of every religion and no religion. But it would be foolish and delusional to deny our nation's Christian roots.

The great British historian, Paul Johnson, once observed that “America was born Protestant.” He said that “it's important to grasp that American society embraced the principles of voluntarism and tolerance in [religious] faith in a spirit not of secularism but of piety.” America was never imagined, therefore, as a “secular state; it might more accurately be described as a moral and ethical society without a state religion.”

Religiously informed thought and language pervade the American Founding. Christian ideas shaped most of our political structures and many of our key national documents. The point is this: We can't cut our nation off from those roots today without hurting the rights and liberties we all take for granted.

A few months ago, in Ireland, someone asked for my thoughts about today's "post-Christian" culture. I said then as I say again now, that "post-Christian" society may *seem* very similar to the pagan world that St. Paul first confronted. But in fact, it's much worse. Why? Because the pagan world had an excuse. We don't. There's really no such a thing as a "post-Christian" era. The redemptive mission of Jesus Christ is unique, unrepeatable and forever. Christ is the center and meaning of history. There is *nothing* after Jesus Christ except a void.

The modern turning away from Jesus is not a return to the pagan past. It's an apostasy, and when Scripture tells us that Christ will spit the lukewarm out of his mouth (Rev 3:16), we need to reflect very soberly on what that implies for people who once knew him, but then repudiate him. The early pagans had an alibi in their ignorance. Today's paganism involves a specific choice *against* Jesus Christ.

This is why I found some words of President Obama so interesting on his recent trip to Turkey. You'll remember that the President's supporters stressed his religious credentials pretty hard in courting the Christian vote last year. But in seeking common ground with Turkey, a NATO ally whose own secularist revolution was often brutal and intolerant, the President said: "We do not consider ourselves a Christian nation."

Now it would be easy -- and also unfair -- to take those words out of context. I think some of the President's critics have jumped on his comment inappropriately. The point the President was *trying* to make is this: The

United States “has a very large Christian population.” But we consider ourselves “a nation of citizens,” not a sectarian state. That’s obviously true. The trouble is, the President made his remark at a time when the attitude of our leadership classes toward religion in general and Christianity in particular is very different from the past, and much less friendly.

Woodrow Wilson, speaking at a Denver rally in 1911, stressed that "America was born a Christian nation." Franklin D. Roosevelt described the United States as "the lasting concord between men and nations, founded on the principles of Christianity." And Abraham Lincoln, in his March 4, 1861, inaugural address, stated, "intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken this favored land, are still competent to adjust in the best way all our present difficulty." None of these men was evasive or apologetic about saying the simple facts: America was built largely by Christians. Its national consciousness was shaped overwhelmingly by Christian and Christian-influenced thought.

President Obama’s remark in Turkey was much more tentative than his predecessors. And this is useful because it highlights two serious problems for anyone interested in evangelizing American culture. First, the public witness of many American Christians is softening. Second, some groups are working very vigorously to secularize – or more accurately, *de-Christianize* -- our public life and our popular culture.

The information from recent studies on U.S. religious trends is sobering. The percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen in the past two decades. The number of people who see the United States as a Christian nation has dropped to 62 percent, down from 69 percent last year and 71 percent in 2005. The number of Americans who think faith will help answer the country's current problems has dipped to a historic low of 48 percent, down from 64 percent in 1994.

For *Catholics* who actually practice their faith, this news probably doesn’t come as a surprise. For the past 40 years and longer, too many American Catholics – and I mean not just average laypeople, but Catholic clergy, scholars and religious as well – have worked frantically to fit into American culture. We succeeded. Now we can see the results. Too many of us are happy with our complacency, vanity, compromises, comfort and bad formation. And something similar is obviously happening with many of our fellow Christians.

By the way, this habit of vanity and compromise is really what the argument is about in Notre Dame’s decision to honor President Obama at its commencement. The issue is *not* whether the President is a good or a bad man. He’s obviously a sincere and able man, and we always have the duty to respect our public officials -- even when we disagree strongly with them. But the President’s views and actions on sanctity of life issues – and remember that the right to life is the foundation of every other right – run directly against Catholic belief. And a Catholic institution should not honor that kind of behavior.

What’s also revealing is what most self-described Catholics think about the controversy. Of Catholics who’ve heard about it, 50 percent support Notre Dame’s invitation to the President, and 28 percent oppose it. But those numbers are misleading. When we look at Catholics who *actually practice* their faith through weekly worship, only 37 percent support Notre Dame’s decision and 45 percent oppose it. The important point is this: It’s not enough to say you’re Catholic, or Christian, or anything else. You also need to *conform your heart and your actions* to what the label requires. Otherwise you’re living a version of the self-deceit and illusions Daniel Boorstin warned about so clearly.

Of course even in the best circumstances, our sinfulness *always* weakens our Christian witness. Even a culture that might explicitly describe itself as Christian, and then actually strive to be Christian, would still always be a mix of light and dark, virtue and evil. That’s part of our human condition. What’s new about our current moment is that too many Christians have made peace with that sinfulness, baptized it with the language of personal conscience, and stopped trying to convert anybody -- including themselves.

The American Christian landscape is weakened further by deliberate efforts to secularize our public life. Scholars like the late Christopher Lasch in *The Revolt of the Elites*, and Christian Smith and his colleagues in *The Secular Revolution*, are well worth reading. They demonstrate that some modern elites find the influence of religion, and especially Christianity, inconvenient. They'd like it to go away as a public force in American life. And they're working to make that happen.

I also find it strange that our media so often overlook or misrepresent the role of religious faith in world affairs, despite the power it *still* has in the lives of most Americans. Here's an easy example. When Somali pirates recently held an American ship captain prisoner, most news organizations ignored the fact that: (a) the ship was manned by Christians trying to bring relief supplies to Kenya as an act of Christian charity; (b) that the crew explicitly linked the captain's spirit of sacrifice to his Christian faith; and (c) that they regarded his liberation on Easter Sunday as a gift from God.

Earlier I said I'd make two points to help us apply the example of St. Paul in our own times. My first point was this: We need to understand our own age as well as Paul understood his.

Now I'll conclude with my second point, and I'm very pleased to steal it from Karl Marx.

Here's my second point: Interpreting our culture isn't enough. Understanding our world isn't enough. The point, as Marx said, is to change it.

Marx was simply repeating -- and deforming -- what every serious Christian has known since apostolic times. Baptism is a mandate to act. When Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19), he was talking to you and me. Here. Today. Now. We're missionaries. The mission is hardwired into our Christian gene code. When St. Paul says, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16), he's giving a voice to what *all of us* should feel if we really understand our faith.

From a Pauline point of view, whether America is really 80 percent or 50 percent or 10 percent Christian is unimportant. The only thing that matters is what you and I do right now with the gift of faith we've been given. God will do the work; he's got a pretty good track record when we don't get in the way. Our job is to become the best cooperators and instruments of his will that we can be.

One of the best things we can do for our own faith is to simply turn off the noise around us one night a week. Computers, televisions, cell phones, DVD players, radios, iPods -- turn them all off. Not every night. Just one night. This is a very fruitful habit we can borrow from Mormon families: one night a week spent reading, talking with each other, listening to each other and praying over Scripture. We can *at least* do that much. And if we do, we'll discover that eventually we're sober again and not drunk on technology and our own overheated appetites.

Obviously we can't ignore the forces that are reshaping our culture and its vocabulary. I have no idea what American life will look like in 50 years. But unless Christians get involved in public life and work to advance their convictions in the public square, our nation could be very different from anything the Founders intended.

Many of you will live to see that future. In fact, many of you will help create it by your choices. I'm in my mid-60s. The way that I look at the world has been formed by the printed word. It's up to you to find a way to pour the Word of God and the person of Jesus Christ into human hearts shaped by different tools and new knowledge. You can't do that by repudiating or withdrawing from the world. You need to engage it. And if

Paul could begin the conversion of an empire with nothing but a love for God – well, at least you have nothing less than he did to work with.

The lesson of St. Paul, now and for every generation, is that we need to engage the world with intelligence, a creative spirit and, most importantly, charity, which "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (I Cor 13:7).

But real charity depends on truth; not shallow courtesies and not false compromises. Paul reminds us that charity "does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the *truth*" (I Co 13:6). In fact, no greater gift of love exists than sharing the truth with others. Only God's truth sets us free. Respect for others is always a Christian duty. But it's never an excuse for indifference to our mission. It can never be separated from a zeal for God's truth about human nature and dignity.

Staying loyal to the truth in today's unfriendly culture, which is so badly wounded by what Pope Benedict XVI calls a "dictatorship of relativism," is a tough task. The nature of truth is vital not only to Paul's theology, but to the substance of our faith. Jesus himself did not claim to "preach" the truth but to *be* the truth. That's why a Christianity based only on technique or useful ideas or a system of good social principles will always fail. Christianity can only be anchored in a love for Jesus Christ.

The cross of Jesus Christ is not a "philosophy." It's an instrument of killing stained with the blood of a Person who was once dead *but is now alive*. Only if we really believe the Resurrection of Jesus Christ in our bones, only if we endure in proclaiming that truth, we will be able to repeat with St. Paul's relief and joy: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day" (2 Tim 4:7-8).

Thanks, and God bless you.

Albacete: I was involved in the preparation of a television program on *Frontline* about the effect of John Paul II on the men and women of culture today around the world. That is weird territory. It was an interesting project because I was asked to more or less represent the Pope. The poor man must have been stunned, but it was an interesting thing to attempt to explain and then people would react one way or another, either for or against.

I want to say two things. One thing that impressed all these people, again total secularists and completely incarnations of our times, one thing that broke through that was the realization (and it sounds weird) that this man was a man of prayer. He was about...wasn't just living in this worldwide institution, wounded and hurt by years of religion and controversies, trying to give it a new hope, to restore confidence, but that was understandable; that's his job. But what impressed them the most was that which was not his job, or they didn't think it was, and that is to see him in prayer...that he had to do with God. It sounds amazing, but that was amazing. He kind of broke through.

The second point was his relentless and utter confidence that between Jesus Christ and the desires of the human heart, there is no conflict whatsoever. And we have to give up nothing of the human in order to be united with Christ. Again it may seem something obvious, but this was crucial. That is why *Gaudium et Spes* 22, all these things that are coming back, quotes from the Pope...but through it all it has found the assertion of the incarnation...that we too in Christ, the historical Christ Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Mary, who has died and risen, and what the human heart looks for. And really the only thing that can satisfy it...there is no contradiction, no hostility, not even a tension—the tension is introduced by sin—but not even the tension. This is the way we are created in Christ.

Now, again, it may sound pious, to speak like that I may not have used those words, but the idea of the compatibility between Christ and the humanity is astounding and it was perceived with great interest. The problem is when it hits, when it happens, as the Archbishop and Fr. Peter said, we need to point immediately to a community, to a friendship, to a group, as we saw with Saint Paul...and unfortunately that's not always possible, and you know that this will disappear five minutes later—the insight they had, the attraction they found, the different humanity that Pope John Paul II represented. You never even saw him personally; you just watched him on television. I met the Holy Father way before he became pope, and he had no props, dressed in white, no big balconies, nothing. He just had a corn flake. As I recall, I was astounded. I detected a heaviness, not in terms of his weight, but of his humanity. He was a MAN! It was awesome. And as I tell you I never thought he would be pope or anything like that...it's true; it's a weakness. And Christ uses that, reaches us only that way. Then there has to be, as the Holy Father said in that speech that we mentioned, the Word of God in this place...This is the Church, but the Church is too broad a term, in a sense. You need a face...someone...a name.

I love the idea of Saint Paul going back to his place of conversion and getting some of the ground, the earth because at least he knew where it was. It's like John and Andrew when they meet Jesus many years later sitting in the Patmos Hilton...John was putting together the Gospels...or perhaps dictating it to his co-writer Sidney Hook. Anyway he's writing it down and he says, "It was 4 pm." That's concreteness! This is what is lacking. We've got the best message...the Grace of God. It will not fail. You can't put Jesus back into the tomb! Come on! He's risen!

We need to have a witness so that people can be accompanied, and here is the key to everything...otherwise everything else fails.

I was supposed to give some concluding remarks, so think of it that way. Right now we have to be out of here. Thank you very much. Good bye.