



24th General Chapter

Keynote Address

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The Oneness to which We Are Called and for which We Are Sent: Biblical Reflections

Dear friends, what a privilege to be with you today as you gather for your 24th General Chapter. I thank Sister Mary and all of you for this invitation. And what a joy to spend a few minutes with you reflecting on the heart of the gospel mission entrusted to us by the Risen Christ—that we are called to be “one,” even as Jesus and the Father are one—a motif echoed in the striking theme of your chapter.

And how timely is this fundamental call of the gospel in today’s fractured world. My own country here is almost paralyzed with sharp and conflictual divisions and with crude political discourse at so many levels. Our world shattered by deadly violence in so many places: the tragedy of Syria, acts of terrorism in Europe and Africa, threats to unleash the insane fury of war in Asia. On a less dramatic scale, but still significant and toxic, are some deep divisions in our own Catholic community. I believe a time like this, particularly for a religious community with such a great history and blessed with a great sense of mission, is not a time to catalogue our woes—although we cannot ignore them—but it is a time to sink more deeply into the very heart of our Christian faith and find renewed energy and commitment. It is the compelling and seductive beauty of the Gospel I want to point to today.

Some years ago, I read a novel by Barbara Gordon whose mood and content have stayed with me. It was entitled, *I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can*, and was about the struggle of a very successful executive for a major television network in the U.S. She had reached the pinnacle of her career as a major executive but suddenly, under the impact of a frantic pace and extraordinary pressures, her life began to fall apart: a shattered marriage, a terrible falling out with her only daughter, and unaccustomed setbacks and loss of purpose in her work. Gradually she sank into mental illness, literally locked herself away in her apartment, afraid to come out, nearly suicidal. The novel—which was based on a real story—deals mainly with this woman's struggle to put her life back together. One key moment came when in an excruciating bout of panic, she told her doctor that she literally did not know how to live anymore—she was afraid to step out of her bed. The doctor said, “You do know one thing very important—you know how to breathe.” And he asked the woman to be still for a moment and listen to herself breathe—breathing in and breathing out.

Years later, after a long steep climb to put her life back in order, the woman recalled that moment as a turning point for her. She **did** know how to breathe, taking in life-breath and letting it out. The vital exercise that keeps a human being alive.

That fundamental act—breathing in and breathing out—is something of an image I would like to use this morning in reflecting on our encounter with Jesus and his mission. This is a turbulent time for our world and for the church. In the midst of great vitality and blessing all around us, there is also much pain and loss in our world, as we know. Coupled to all the problems we can catalogue in our public life, there are, for some time now, many people who work in the church, religious included, who feel themselves caught in a more subtle undertow. Diminishment of numbers, budget cutbacks, uncertainty about the future, a low-grade depression that suppresses hope on the part of many and puts people in a survival mode. We, too, may feel we are dancing as fast as we can.

There are many things we can do to refresh our minds, our spirits, our bodies. Allow me to suggest one way of refreshing ourselves as a Christian people is by recalling the depth and beauty of the mission entrusted to us by Jesus. I believe that the vital life-breath of Christian life in all its forms is the Christian mission. To encounter Jesus is not simply a private moment without public consequence. No, to authentically encounter the Jesus of the Gospels is also to be inflamed with his mission to our world.

Extending Christ's presence into the world—in all of its beauty and depth, with all of its grace and transformative power, with its magnetic call to unity—this is the primary call of every Christian. Evangelization or mission is not to be understood simply in the classic sense of mission to the nations or **ad gentes**, although such a form of mission remains valid. No, we know that mission is not confined to the heroic ministry of a few who left their home shores to win souls for Christ. This is one of the great developments we can take pride in over the past few years—to have a sense of the full scope of the Christian mission in the world. John Paul II has noted that every Christian “. . . has the prophetic task of recalling and serving the divine plan for humanity, as it is announced in scripture and as it emerges from an attentive reading of the signs of God's providential action in history. This is the plan for the salvation and reconciliation of humanity.” Mission in this deep and broad sense includes every aspect of Christian life: our worship, the spirit of our prayer and contemplation, our commitment to justice and peace, our striving for reconciliation and mutual respect among peoples and religious traditions; our care for creation itself. This comprehensive sense of the Christian mission is truly, in the Pope's words, a plan for the salvation and reconciliation of humanity and indeed of the created world in which humanity thrives. This is the “new evangelization” of which the last three Popes have spoken. Its spirit is not imperialistic or dominating. Even as the gospel is proclaimed with confidence and with gratitude for its proven beauty, evangelization is done in a spirit of respect for others and their sacred traditions and the integrity of their cultures. We are called, in the words of Pope Francis, to be “missionary disciples.”

The Mission of Jesus and the Christian Mission

It is a truism but let us repeat it here: Every form of Christian life—including in a particularly intensive way religious life—must take its inspiration from the life and mission of Jesus. It is in truly encountering Jesus that we find our mission in the world. And if any sense of Christian mission must take its spirit and meaning from the mission of Jesus, then that is where we must turn.

Breathing in and breathing out . . . that primal human work is also a metaphor that I think applies to the mission of Jesus. One of the ways I have come to think of his ministry is something like the work of breathing—a drawing in of life into a vital center where true communion is found; the extending of life to the farthest boundaries of reality. A gesture similar to an embrace, reaching out and drawing in. The more I have stood back from the gospels, the more I conceive of Jesus' mission in terms of these two related gestures that become one fluid movement and characterize the fundamental elements of Jesus' ministry: reaching out and drawing in. Both gestures were compelled by the deepest convictions and religious instincts of his life and his vocation: reaching out in a wide embrace of the whole expanse of Israel, including those on the margins; drawing in the entire community—washed and unwashed—into a communion of life, a oneness, that gives glory to God.

One of my favorite texts, one that the early church surely did not invent, is that of **Matthew 11:18**. You recall this text where Jesus confronts his opponents, playing back their hostile words:

‘We piped you a tune and you did not dance, we sang you a dirge and you did not wail.’ For John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking, and you said he is insane. But the Son of Man came eating and drinking and you say, ‘Behold a wine bibber and a glutton, a lover of tax collectors and those outside the law.’ Yet Wisdom is proved by her deeds.

Implicit in his opponents' hostile response is a tribute to the two characteristic gestures of Jesus that I spoke of. "A lover of tax collectors and those outside the law" – a sign of Jesus' extraordinary outreach beyond the boundaries. Jesus was committed to restoring Israel to God, hence in a spirit of compassion he sought out also those who lived on the margins of the community, those on the fringe, the "lost sheep" of the house of Israel. And, at the same, time this "wine bibber and glutton" drew in the lost to the vital center where he would break God's bread with them. Here we see tribute to the inclusive meals so characteristic of Jesus' mission as portrayed in the gospels.

Both of these gestures—reaching out and drawing in—are fundamental to the gospel portrayal of Jesus. No contemporary study of the historical Jesus would deny the fact that Jesus had extraordinary rapport with those on the margin, with those who were isolated and alienated without the social context of first century Palestinian Judaism. Think, for example, of the gospels' emphasis on Jesus' commitment as a charismatic healer. All one has to do is read the opening chapter of Mark's Gospel, the Gospel we will encounter in the Sunday readings this coming year, to see in such raw and powerful detail—Jesus healing from sunup to sun down, the doors jammed with the sick who come to him as if drawn by some magnetic force. Healing, then as now, is not only physical transformation—and Jesus was surely dedicated to that—but healing also involves the dissolving of isolation and exclusion which the sick in traditional societies, but also in our own, characteristically experience.

Virtually all of Jesus' encounters with Gentiles in the Gospel literature are in the context of healing. This reflects, in part, the inherently boundary-breaking nature of the healing stories in the New Testament. In most of the stories both the healer (Jesus) and the one to be healed perform a boundary-breaking movement, reaching across the chasms of taboo, culture, indeed the boundary between life and death itself in order to be healed. Healing has a comprehensive sense, involving not only physical transformation but spiritual, psychological, and social dimensions. Language of liberation is often used in the healing stories, particularly when demonic

possession is described as oppressive, as in the case of the Gadarene demoniac in Mark 5:1-20, or the woman bent-double in Luke 13:10-17. From the New Testament perspective at least, the Christian mission of liberation can find a profound basis in the healing mission of Jesus which frees people from overwhelming experiences of evil which dehumanize and oppress them. Healing or exorcism takes the form of liberation from evil and inclusion in a community of life.

The transformations involved in the healing stories include not only the physical, social and spiritual condition of the sick or disabled but also a profound challenge and transformation of the community itself. Thus in the story of the woman bent-double in Luke 13, the liberation of the woman by Jesus is seen as a profound disturbance to the order of the synagogue on the part of the synagogue manager. Jesus vigorously champions the right of the woman, a daughter of Abraham, to be healed on the Sabbath. The healing of the Gadarene demoniac in Mark 5, an obvious mission story, brings chaos and disruption to the village when the demon enters into the herd of pigs and they charge down the cliff into the sea, and then the Gentile demoniac is restored to full participation in his community. In the story of the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman of Matthew 15, it is Jesus himself who finds his assumptions challenged. No longer is his mission only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel now that this Gentile woman and her insistent faith have made entry into the realm of his healing ministry.

These stories tap into a powerful inclusive dynamic within the Gospel literature, a dynamic captured not only in the healing stories but in materials as diverse as Jesus' signature teaching on love of enemies, his call of Levi and other social outcasts, and his parables such as the famous mercy parables of Luke 15 on the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, and the radical emphasis on the obligations to forgiveness and reconciliation in the community discourse of Matthew 18. In all of this material Jesus draws the outcast, the marginalized, the alienated and the oppressed into the vital circle of the community, into the "oneness" of which your community's constitution speaks, and at the same time calling the community itself to conversion

and openness. Thus healing—understood in a broad and inclusive sense--was an intrinsic part of the early Christian understanding of mission.

Consider, too, as part of the expansive nature of his mission, Jesus' eye for the socially marginalized: Levi at his tax collector's post, the centurion in Capernaum, the Canaanite woman, blind Bartimaeus by the roadside, the Samaritan woman alone at the well, Zacchaeus in his sycamore tree. It is also clear from the Sermon on the Mount and other sayings and parables of Jesus that he was convinced that those devalued by others were themselves capable of heroic virtue. Jesus had great faith in the capacity of the human person for holiness and greatness.

There is no doubt that the historical Jesus reached out beyond the boundaries and there is also no doubt, I believe, that this provocative outreach was grounded in his own experience of the God of Israel as one whose reach was not confined to the boundaries of Israel but reached beyond those boundaries. Jesus, it seems, opened his mind and heart to the occasional Gentile as well. As a devout Jew Jesus did not frequent Gentile territories nor did he conceive a mission to the Gentiles as his primary mission as one called to restore Israel, but when confronted with one of God's children in need, even if a Gentile, he apparently responded with compassion—setting the foundation for what the early community would ultimately feel compelled to do, to reach beyond Israel in the name of Jesus. Jesus earned and gloried in the judgment of his enemies: “a lover of tax collectors and those outside the law.”

And then there is the dimension of his drawing in—clearly an important way of understanding the Jesus of history is not that he came to found a church in the sense of establishing a completely new entity apart from the community of Israel. The “church” was already there, the **qahal** of God, the “assembly” or “*ecclesia*” of Israel. Jesus, rather, saw as his God-given vocation the restoration of Israel, the breathing of new life and a deeper sense of community into the people created by God and sealed with the Sinai covenant, a “oneness of heart and mind” as Acts portrays the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem. So Jesus in a burst of wonderful irony and God-

given optimism would call his ragtag and vulnerable band of disciples the “twelve” and promise them that they would sit on the thrones of the tribes of Israel.

And here surely is the inner meaning of the extraordinary meals that seem to have been a characteristic of the ministry of Jesus. Meals with Levi and his friends, meals with Simon the Pharisee, meals with the crowds on the hillsides, meals with his disciples. The ideal meals that are described in his parables—wedding feasts in which the invitations extend to the highways and by-ways, royal banquets groaning with food and seeking guests, meals at which strangers would come from east and west sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Passover meals drenched with poignancy and longing.

The early community would see these characteristic meals as evocative of God’s feeding the people in the desert with manna and with quail, and as a sign of the Eucharists to come. In each case, they signified the ultimate meaning of Jesus’ mission as a gathering of Israel, as an inclusive communion of all the children of God, as a sign of the ultimate communion in joy and praise and abundant vitality with the God of Israel who, in the vision of Isaiah 25, would set a banquet on Sion and feed the people with choice meats and beautiful wines, taking away the cobweb of death and drying the tears from every face.

The mission of Jesus, understood in these terms of outreach and drawing in, of inclusion and communion, would lead ultimately to his death and give meaning to the cross as an act of profound love. Jesus died because of the way he lived.

Thus the characteristic notes and deep patterns of Jesus’ ministry—his reaching out and his drawing in—can ultimately be traced to Jesus’ own experience of the God of Israel. A God who is not a tribal God but the God of the nations. A God whose transcendent beauty reached far beyond the boundaries of Israel’s imagination and far exceeded it hopes. A God whose unconditional love and startling compassion were more than any human heart could grasp. This God was the ground of Jesus’ being and

the foundation of his mission. The Spirit-driven intuition of the early community would enable it to see that Jesus not only revealed this God through his ministry but that Jesus himself—in his very being—embodied this divine reality.

Here we touch on another intuition of the church's teaching about mission that has come to the fore in our times, namely that the ultimate theological and biblical foundation for mission is the very life of God, indeed the mystery of the Trinity itself. God embodies the mission impulse—reaching out in self-transcending love—love as an incredible, irrepressible abundance emanating from the very relational being of God, a love so intense that the three are one, love surging out into the act of creation, love extending into the life of a people and their history. And a love whose ultimate intent is to draw all creation into the unfathomable beauty and vitality of God's own being—to create a communion among all living things—to become, in the exquisite words of John's Gospel which your constitution cites: "that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Here is the ultimate life-act: breathing out and breathing in; reaching out and drawing in. This divine rhythm of life is the ground of all mission. In a wonderful book on mission in the Old Testament, Lucien Legrand points out that this divine rhythm finds an echo in a dynamic tension inherent in Israel's own life. Legrand sees a fundamental dynamic already apparent in the Old Testament where Israel stretches on the twin poles of its election as God's chosen people and its historic interaction--perhaps we might even say, "mission," to the nations. Although Israel conceived of its own status as unique and compelling, it also understood that the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Israel, was also the God of the Nations. Inevitably, therefore, Israel had to deal with the nations, at times standing over against its surrounding cultures in the name of religious purity, at other times interacting with the nations and absorbing fundamental aspects of their cultural life and religious structures, and still at other times experiencing the nations as instruments in God's own purification or chastisement of Israel.

That dynamic tension between identity and outreach, between community and mission, between particularism and universality arches through the entire Bible, including both testaments. Israel was caught throughout its history between its sense of election as God's own special people, concerned with the demands of the covenant to build a community of justice and compassion—and yet wondering about the nations, those peoples who were also children of Abraham and somehow destined to be part of God's ultimate embrace. Election and outreach. Community and mission. Breathing in and breathing out. This is the spirit that must animate our Church and its religious communities as well.

As I move along in life I find myself more and more depending on John's Gospel to capture what Jesus ultimately means. And I know this Gospel is important to your tradition as School Sisters of Notre Dame and your mission of seeking oneness. I think of John as stepping back from the complexity of the synoptic portrayal of Jesus and his mission, distilling it, and tracing in bold and direct strokes the ultimate meaning of it all.

John's Gospel says it all, in a manner that is at once both simple and profound. John begins his gospel with an exquisite hymn that asserts that Jesus' ultimate origin is in God. God speaks and speaks so eloquently, so completely that this Word completely articulates who God is, this Word, in fact, is *theos*. Because God wants to communicate—because God must breathe out--the Word is sent by God into the world, penetrating the world's substance so completely that the word becomes Flesh, becomes the Incarnate Word embodied in the world, with a human history, a human body and spirit. This, John dares to say, is the ultimate origin of Jesus. Jesus is the word who reveals God and God's message to the world in his very flesh.

If Jesus can be characterized as God's word to the world, what is it that God wants to say in Jesus? What **is** the Word? John's answer is absolute and profound. No text says it better than John 3: "For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might have life

through him.” God’s message is not one of condemnation but redemptive love—this is the heart of the gospel, this is what the Word has to say to the world, this is the primal evangelization.

And for John this ultimate message of God’s word, this message of redemptive love, is expressed in every gesture of Jesus, every discourse, every characteristic action, each act of healing, each prophetic word of truth, every relationship of Jesus with his disciples—all of this is ultimately a word of love, a word of life. That is why for John the ultimate expression of Jesus’ mission, the final and most eloquent statement of what the Incarnate Word has to say to our world is spoken, paradoxically, through his death. John understands the death of Jesus as an act of friendship love—“No greater love than this, than one lay down his life for his friend.” The death of Jesus is an act of love.

And then, at the conclusion of his gospel, John completes the circle. The final destiny of Jesus as the Word of God is ultimately communion—oneness-- in joy and praise with the God of love who sent him into the world. So John depicts the moment of Jesus’ death as an ascent back to God, as a “lifting up” to the full communion of love for which the Word longs. And, John’s Gospel asserts, what happens to Jesus is also the destiny of humanity. Through the power of the Spirit, the disciples, too, are to learn the language of love, to love as Jesus did, to lay down their lives for their friends. And, as in the case of Jesus, so the ultimate endpoint of human destiny is communion with God—when all will be one, “as you Father in me and I in you, and them in us”.

Here is where the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith fuse into one. If Jesus of Nazareth can be described as animated by a profound conviction of God’s presence, by an experience of the God of Israel as both transcendently holy and awesomely beautiful, yet also infinitely tender and unconditionally gracious and loving, and if this was the core conviction that imprinted itself in the character of Jesus’ mission and teaching, then the Spirit of God has led the church from its first moments to

understand that so completely did God's presence suffuse Jesus that, in fact, he *was* that presence incarnate. So thoroughly did Jesus of Nazareth radiate the Spirit of God that he, in fact, substantially partakes of that divine Spirit. Jesus reveals God not only by his profound teaching but reveals God in his very embodiment as Son of God.

Not far is the bridge between the gospel portrayals of Jesus and the church's determined convictions about the identity of Jesus and the character of faith in him. We owe Paul the key insight: the church is the "body" of Christ, not just as an apt simile but as a profound metaphysical reality. As scandalous and as fragile as the community of the church may appear, we believe that in and through the church, the Risen Christ is present, is embodied, is visible to the world.

Schillebeeckx's fine contribution of long ago still holds: the church is the primordial sacrament of the encounter with Christ, and all the other specific sacramental acts of the church are ultimately but expressions of this fundamental sacrament. So here is where the question is joined. If the church is the body of Christ in the world, then the actions of the church and its mission must aspire to reveal the same fundamental character of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the gospels. We cannot imitate Jesus on the level of the details of his life. We are not first century Palestinian, charismatic Jewish healers and messianic teachers. But on the level of fundamental character, of defining characteristics, there must be credible correspondence between the fundamental character of Jesus' mission and the mission of the church. Both the life of Jesus and the life of the church have to be grounded in the character of the God revealed by Jesus, both have to be seated in that fundamental harmony, that ground melody that gives tone and coherence to everything we ultimately say and do.

Conclusion

If breathing out and breathing in is a metaphor for the divine act in the world, if reaching out in a gesture of compassion and justice to the boundaries of human life and creation and drawing in to a vital communion of life and love defines the mission of Jesus, then this is also the fundamental mission of the church and of every form of ministry within the church. If the church is to be the sacrament of the encounter with Christ—then this also defines the fundamental character of every Christian community whether a parish, or a religious community, or any formal gathering of Christians. A sense of mission that reflects the divine mission in the world and one in harmony with the mission of Christ is not just reaching out, therefore, but also the act of gathering in. Far too often we wedge them apart. Mission defined only in the sense of crossing boundaries and frenetic activity outside of any vital community life. Or community turned inward and separate, a stale ecclesial culture with no concern for or vital communion with the world of humanity and creation of which we are a part—the kind of “clerical” culture that Pope Francis has challenged so often by his words and his actions.

If this is the scope of the mission to which we are called—a mission rooted in the very life of the Triune God and one whose goal is the very quest for ultimate life and communion with God—then the enterprise to which we are called is far more fundamental than any of our concerns and far more crucial than we can imagine. This is something very important for us now. At a time of diminishment for many, at a time when we feel awash in scandals of the most debilitating kind, in a world whose uncertainties and explosiveness are threatening, in a world so fractured and divided—in times like these we could think of our mission as hopeless or insignificant. We could, in fact, forget how to breathe. No, we are not engaged in something petty or sectarian or trivial. We need to remind ourselves that we are alive. We are not simply leading pious lives or performing routine tasks. Our biblical heritage, the very wellsprings of our faith, and the heritage and mission of your own religious community, remind us that we are called to partake in the divine task in the world—

reaching out in healing and compassion to all of God’s people, drawing in from across boundaries of culture and race and age to form a communion of life pleasing to God, reaching out even to the boundaries of our universe and being in communion with the earth itself. Even if we are weak and inadequate, even if the way is not always clear for us, we are engaged in a noble, sacred task whose boundaries are as wide as the world and whose purpose is nothing less than the glory of God. We must remember that it is part of our biblical heritage and the tradition of our faith that God’s Spirit is not confined to the church but roams the world and its peoples—breathing where it will. The arena of mission is not simply the church but the world itself. “The field is the world”—these are Jesus’ own words in his explanation of the parable of the sower.

So, despite our problems and our weakness, this is not a time for hesitation or retreat. We cannot submit to fatigue of the spirit. Now is the time to lift up for ourselves, for the church at large, and for the next generation of Christians, our best and most noble and most ambitious ideals—it is the time for us to once more encounter in faith the Jesus of the gospels and thereby to renew our sense of the Christian mission to the world. In his wonderful messages to the church, Pope Francis has reminded us that our lives must be entwined with three fundamental relationships: with the God of love, with each other as children of God, and with creation the arena of life that God has given us. Aware of these vital relationships we are called, in the Pope’s beautiful words, to “build a civilization of love”.

I would like to close with this story that might serve as commentary on what I have been trying to say about the church as the body of Christ, as a church called to oneness in the spirit of Jesus, the revealer of God’s love for the world. You might remember hearing about the man here in the United States, in the city of Detroit, who was hospitalized awaiting a heart transplant. While waiting for a suitable donor heart, his own daughter was tragically killed in an automobile accident in Tennessee. On her driver’s license, she had marked “organ donor.” When the doctors approached him and asked if he would consider accepting his own daughter’s heart for his transplant, he said that, at first, he could not even think of it—so overwhelming was

his grief and confusion. But then, he said, I began to think what would my daughter want me to do...and he consented to receive her heart. At the press conference as he was being discharged from the hospital (the heart, of course, was a perfect fit), a reporter asked him, “What difference does all this make to you now?” The man paused for a moment and controlled his emotion and said, “I want you to know that my life will never be the same because I can never forget that I bear in my body the heart of one who loved me and gave her life for me. Nothing will ever be the same for me.”

Seeing ourselves as the embodiment of the Risen Christ means living our lives out of that fundamental consciousness. Being a Christian, Pope Benedict had reminded us when he inaugurated the Year of Faith, means living our lives as an experience of love received and communicating our faith as an experience of grace and joy. That experience of love received and love given, of breathing in and breathing out, of seeking oneness with God, with each other, with our world, describes in fact the spirit of Jesus himself. And we are the body of Christ for the world and we are the church. Like the man with a new heart given out of love, nothing can ever be the same for us.

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