

Dear People Whom God Loves,

**COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE
OF JESUS TODAY COMPARED TO THE 1950'S**

I was ordained a priest in 1951. My experience has been framed by life in the United States. It has also been formed from the thinking of people beyond our country.

These thoughts are random but they do point to the need of searching for new ways of expressing Jesus' message in 2013. The message of Jesus will fall on deaf ears if we do not express it in ways that draw people in to the depths of that message.

I believe that the message of Jesus can be valuable to people of many different times and cultures. I believe that it has the power to touch perhaps all humans. I also believe that we stand in the way of spreading that message by not understanding that our cultural expression does not touch people of different cultures.

I also understand that Jesus' message is not totally elastic. As we more deeply understand the message, the better we will be able to express it in a way that draws in many kinds of people. I of course am not capable of doing this.

That is why we need dialog among theologians across the world, bishops across the world along with the Magisterium of our church. We also need to hear the thoughts, dreams and fears of the people in the pews, people of other religions and no religion.

This will be messy. Pursuing truth is messy. I also believe that the Spirit of God works better in messiness than rigidity. When we are rigid we don't leave much room for the Spirit.

Getting back to my random thoughts about why we are such a different place in our country in 2013 then we were in 1950's.

1. Our Country is much more secular today. Belief in God was more widespread in the 1950's. We can't just assume that a person believes in

God. Some of this has been caused by some images of God that don't deserve to be believed in. When someone tells me that they don't believe in God, I sometimes ask them: what kind of God is it that you don't believe in?

2. Science has revealed to us a different understanding of the universe than used to be common. This can lead to a tragic and unnecessary question. Do I hold onto my faith or do I accept the knowledge that science reveals?

The science story tells us what happened-the big bang and consequent development. It is a story based on reason, experiment and mathematical calculation. That story leaves me in awe and wonder and causes me to wonder not just about what happened but the deeper question: what is this all about? What does it mean? What is behind it? Why is the universe intelligible? These wonderings draw me to believe in God. I know that it doesn't do that for others.

The Jewish-Christian story in the book of Genesis – the first book of our Bible – tells me something about what it means. It tells me that when I look more deeply and understand the way the physical world looked to people in ancient times.

It tells me that there is something more to the universe than meets the eye. It tells me that there is something ultimate behind what science can discover. It tells me that this ultimate reality is interested in and has concern for us humans and the world. It tells me that we humans resemble God because of our freedom that allows us to love (and of course hate). It tells me that this ultimate reality is infinite love and so cannot hate. The Jesus story deepens the Genesis story. The first letter of John reminds us that God is love and that when we remain in love we remain in God and God in us. It tells me that I am loved not just in spite of my faults and sins but with all my faults and sins.

This gives me meaning in life. If we come from Love, are held by Love right now and are being drawn more deeply into Love, then life has purpose and meaning. When our lives are tragic and hard, this is hard to see and it may seem foolish. It helps me then to remember that Love is mysterious and that I am far from knowing how Love works. That is when I just have to hang on and trust that Love is in all the joys, sorrows, successes, failures and tragedies of life. I must confess that I don't do it very well.

I am grateful for the science story and the Jewish-Christian story. They are different and at the same time complement each other.

Finally the Jesus story with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit tells us that Ultimate Reality, as the source of all, is totally other than us is at the same time intimately within us. I think that that is what is meant by saying the transcendent is immanent.

3. There has been a change in how authority is able to draw people to follow. In the 1950's it was often enough for a person in a position of authority just to declare what people were to do and to some extent how to think.

It was not unusual for a new pastor to tell the people that their role was to pray, pay and obey. Today there is a much greater need to persuade in order for people to follow. A person in a position of authority will not likely be listened to until respect is earned.

I remember when I went to my first assignment as a priest the summer of 1951. I had a pastor who was unusual at that time. He said to me: John, don't ever demand respect because you are a priest. Earn respect as a man and respect for the priesthood will follow".

4. The sense of sin is different. For more people today there is no sense of sin. Thinking of sin was much more prevalent in the 1950's. But there is another change that is more subtle. Back then God was more seen as a powerful law giver– the Ten Commandments. This filtered down to church laws and civil laws. Ultimate Reality was a law giver.

Today for many believers God is seen as love rather than a law giver. When Ultimate Reality is seen as love, sin is seen as rejecting love.

While it is true that some acts of disobedience are also a turning away from love, there is a shift from looking at sin just as an action to being more aware of the internal disposition of the one doing the action. Being aware of this will help is be more persuasive in speaking of morality.

5. There are also today more people who need to challenge decisions when the reason given doesn't make sense to them. This is why we must know where people are coming from if we are to be persuasive. This one reason why we must be good and patient listeners if we are to effectively communicate the message of Jesus.

If we are to listen well, it is imperative that we be humble enough to recognize that we don't have all the answers. We do need to have convictions. At the same time we must learn to listen to information that challenges our convictions. It is my personal experience that when I am able to do this, my beliefs are deepened and enhanced. Unfortunately, my stubbornness too frequently gets in the way.

6. Another difference is our rapid growth in communication. It is harder to keep secrets. Once something is on the internet it can go quickly throughout the world. This can be a great tool in communicating the message of Jesus.

The flip side of this is that the mistakes and sins of religion and churches are known to vast members of people. The good part of this is that it can help us to be more honest and acknowledge our mistakes and sins. At the same time the information can be wrong or at least taken out of context.

This means that it is more difficult for a religion or church to be credible. That means that we can be tempted to throw out the good with the bad.

We are indeed in a world different from the 1950's.

7. In the 1950's our church was in a strict mode. It was to a large extent – just do what you are told to do. While there was some resentment in a number of people, by and large we all thought that is just the way it is. There was large acceptance of a very strict church. That meant that there was not the polarization we find today.

The Second Vatican Council took place in the early 1960's. There was much excitement in our church as windows were opened to let in the fresh air. There was a sense of freedom and creativity that had not been experienced in our church. Change was in the air. Some of it was good and some was not. This is to be expected in any creative situation.

I see a major error that was made. I am as guilty as many others. I must acknowledge my own failing.

Some people embraced the new freedom and creativity. Some resisted it. This caused a division within our church. We were all Catholics but we thought differently about many things. I didn't see any loss of faith with either side of the division.

With the new scholarship becoming prevalent much that was expressed made some people feel (understandably so) that their church was being taken away. Devotions that were crucial to many people were not as prevalent as before. The Mass was now in English. For many Latin was seen as sacred.

The result was that some were rejoicing and some were sorrowing.

Though classifications are often misleading, we were divided into "Traditional Catholics" and "Progressive Catholics".

This brings me to what I see as a pastoral error. In the euphoria, freedom and creativity we did not minister well to "Traditional Catholics". Many felt left out and behind. The wounds were real.

What I see as our pastoral challenge today is to minister to all of our people. That is traditional, progressive and those who don't fit exactly into either category. We need to do a better job of ministering to those who are progressive as well as those that are traditional.

We need to keep the faith and minister to all. A huge challenge. We will never minister perfectly or even close to perfectly. But it is imperative that this be the horizon toward which we walk. And this will be only by the grace of God.

What I see is that we need to go deeper than "traditional" and "progressive" people. If we listen to and learn from each other we will go deeper. We will find that our "traditional" and "progressive" ways gain new life and insight. We will learn to love each other with our many differences. We will discover that we are all humans with the loving presence of God in us, that we are all Catholics. To quote James Joyce speaking of the Catholic Church, "Here comes everybody".

The old Catholic saying still rings true. "In essentials unity, in non-essentials freedom, in all things charity."

8. In the 1950's we were used to democracy in the USA but this did not greatly influence our understanding of this applying in any way to governance in our church.

With the Second Vatican Council it became more widespread that collegiality was important for our church with the realization that in the early years of the church collegiality was practiced.

This was not to say our church should function just like democracy in our country. But it became recognized that collegiality was a way of introducing some of the democratic values into our church's government.

This means that we are in a different situation than we were in the 1950's. Not recognizing this can interfere with communicating the message of Jesus.

9. In the 1950's reality (for most people) was seen as stable and fixed. With advancing scientific knowledge and the more rapid spread of that knowledge among most people, reality is recognized as dynamic.

Reality was always dynamic but we didn't see it that way. This means that more people today see the need for adjustment and creativity. This means that saying "we've always done it this way" doesn't convince as many people. We can learn from the past but we cannot just repeat the part uncritically and be credible.

Our church has faced challenges throughout its history and has survived. We will always face challenges but the challenges keep getting different. I trust the spirit of God. I trust that Spirit will always be with us. We must recognize that we have a part to play. I see that part of our task is to be willing to recognize the "sign of the times".

Some of what is new is good, some is bad. Some of what is old is good, some is bad. I believe that when we are open, the Spirit can work in us most effectively. I also believe the Spirit only needs a crack to get into us. Perhaps I am not willing to be open. But perhaps I can at least be willing to be willing to be open.

I think the Spirit will help me to be willing to be willing to be open. I think that St. Thomas Aquinas was pointing to when he wrote "God moves us freely".

10. For many people the image of God has shifted from that image in the 1950's. Back then for most people God was up there. God was the Supreme Being, the Ruler, the Judge and the one who rewarded us with a place in heaven up there or punished us with a place in hell, depending on how good or bad we were.

That did provide a sense of ultimate accountability but it easily made heaven a wonderful place that we earned by our good living.

At some point I began to ask myself if there was any love or virtue in doing good in order to be rewarded or not to do bad to escape punishment. If I am offered a million dollars to do a good deed to someone, is there any love or virtue in doing it? If I am told that I will be beaten to a pulp if I do a bad deed to someone, is there any love or virtue in not doing it?

I think that Jesus is calling us to a much deeper morality than that.

When God is imaged as the infinite Love that is the source of all creation, that surrounds us and lives in us, we can be loved into love. It also helps for us to love each other into love.

I understand that rewards and punishment are necessary in various human situations. But we shouldn't confuse that with the vision of inner transformation that Jesus has for us.

With the first image obedience is primary. With the second image love is primary. Obedience and love both have their place. In my view of Jesus, love is primary.

11. In the 1950's because conformity was so strongly emphasized, creativity didn't have a very large place in the way our church functioned and taught. Also there was not the call among most Catholics for greater creativity.

Today that has changed. With the growing deeper knowledge of scripture and theology and increasing education of so many people, the ways of

communicating to people has changed. The message of Jesus can touch many different times and cultures. Our challenge is to find the ways to make it real to people in our society today. That is one reason why we so badly need creativity today.

12. In the 1950's people who were catholic did not talk religion very much with people of other religions. Neither did church leaders and theologians. The barrier walls were very strong. We don't learn very much when we only talk with people who think like we do.

There is a much greater appreciation of the value of listening to the insights of other Christians and indeed of non-Christians too. I would add that listening to those who do not believe in God is also helpful. Often, I find, that God is been disregarded because of images of God that give strange notions of what God is like. I know that we can't plum just what God is like. But some images are helpful and some are harmful. Sometimes a helpful question is to ask: what kind of God is it that you don't believe in?

13. I think that we need a greater humility today about how God works and what God is and how much we know. As I remember we used to think that we had pretty clear knowledge of how God acts.

Also I think that we were quite certain that we were seeing reality just like God does. We need to keep growing in the depth of our understanding of reality. We need to follow what we know and at the same time be open to deepen and broaden what we know. Only Ultimate Reality knows fully what reality is.

We need the tension of conviction and healthy self-doubt. If we think we know it all, we will not grow.

14. In the 1950's for many more people than today it was sufficient to just be told what to believe by proper authorities. Today there needs to be more dialog and persuasion. The doctrines are what they are but there is more need today to present them in ways that are persuasive and draw people in. This becomes even more important the further we get removed from core doctrines.

15. Because of the greater education of people today, it is important for us who are religious leaders to be more humble about what we know. "Father says so" carried a lot more weight in the 1950's than it does today. Priests are no longer more educated than many of the people in the parish.

It has become more important for us religious leaders to listen rather than immediately give answers.

16. In the 1950's being religious and spiritual meant the same thing. Many people today say I am spiritual but not religious. I find it helpful to distinguish between spirituality and religion. And at the same time to see their connection. How we define spirituality and religion is difficult to pin down. I will try to shed some light on that but remember that what I write is pretty tentative.

I think of spirituality as the direction of one's life to Ultimate Reality. Catholics and many other religious people name Ultimate Reality –God. Other religious people use other names. Also our beliefs vary about what/who Ultimate Reality is.

Also to remember that our beliefs influence the way we direct our lives. I think that almost all of us have some direction for our lives. I would say that means we have a spirituality even though we many live very differently.

To be religious means direct our lives within the framework of the beliefs, morals, practices and rituals of a particular religion. This includes the value of community on the spiritual journey without at the same time erasing our individuality. This is similar to ups and downs of living in a family.

It is also good to remember that just going through the external practices of religion without an internal transformation is not very helpful in allowing our spirituality to blossom. That is the problematic point of religious practice. At the same time, when we allow our religious beliefs, morals, practices and rituals to transform us our spirituality will blossom. The problematic point of living spiritually without a religion is that without the give and take of a community we may not get the depth that comes

from the interchange with other people. It can also mean that our journey is very lonely.

Being an individual and being in community – when put together – is in my opinion the healthiest way to go. I think that we are called to honor both.

17. Finally, distinguishing between a “trial” spirituality and “project” spirituality is helpful. I came across this in the book “Christian Spirituality for Seekers” by Roger Haight. He in turn got it from the book “Signs of the Times: Theological Reflection” by Juan Luis Segundo.

With “trial” spirituality the world is a place of trial. Depending on the choices that we make in this works we will be rewarded with heaven or punished with hell. We will then be cautious and fearful. We better get it right. Our world is just a place of trail. Heaven is where we belong.

“Project” spirituality is different. We humans are partners with God, whose loving creative power pervades everything and lives with us. We have the choice to cooperate with Love to bring about the “reign of God” –that Jesus proclaimed-or not to cooperate. This means that while the “reign of God” will not be complete until the end time, we belong in this world. This world is part of who we are. We are called to bring the spirit of the “reign of God” into ourselves and the world around us.

In my recollection “trial” spirituality was pervasive in the 1950’s. It is not as common today. I think that it does not have the same persuasive power today.

I think that “project” spirituality is more persuasive today. It is not fear based but draws us into the excitement of being partners with Love in our journey together to bring love, compassion and mercy inot our world.

I present these random thoughts for us to ponder as we bring the message of Jesus into a culture that is quite different from the 1950’s. Some of these thoughts will strike home as valuable and some will not. I must continue to ponder them. I invite you to ponder them as well.

Smile, God Loves You,

Father Clay