

Strengthen Your Brothers

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Letters of Encouragement from an
Archbishop to His Priests

J. Peter Sartain

Foreword by Francis Cardinal George, OMI



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To
Reverend Monsignor Charles W. Elmer, PA
loving father and faithful friend to many priests
1923–2011

di cuore

“Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers.”

Luke 22:31-32

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Foreword

Planning is an industry now. Planners are involved in many events and are part of many movements and enterprises: wedding planners, city planners, financial planners, and many others. Planning means we take rational control of our lives, our projects, our events. It's a sign that we are responsible.

When God enters our lives, he asks us to give up control, to surrender our lives to his plan for us and for the world. It is hard to give up our plans, even when our control turns out to be illusory. It's harder still to give up our plans when God doesn't seem to have any plan we can recognize. Fifty years ago, when Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council, he described the world as "lost, confused, and anxious" (*Humanae salutis*, December 25, 1961). So who's in charge?

Throughout Archbishop Sartain's book, there is a deep sense of God's providence, of his care for the world that he governs through the quiet working of truth and love in the midst of our sinfulness and its consequences for the world of nature and of history. Archbishop Sartain has confidence that God is in charge, because he knows in faith that truth and love are the only consistent bases for taking responsibility for others. God's governance is real and effective, even when not immediately evident.

God has placed ordained priests in charge of the Church; and the archbishop's own experience of gently governing God's people has convinced him of the efficacy of priests and their ministry. As Fathers in God, priests are to model in the Church the providential concern that God has for his Church and all his creation. Theirs is a ministry based entirely on truth and love, a ministry often expressed in small gestures, in a quiet unassuming word, in a silent presence.

In prayer, the archbishop reminds us, we recognize “that God keeps vigilant watch over us.” In ministry, priests cooperate with God in caring for his people. They go from prayer to people and back again, always in company with Christ and with their brother priests. Gradually, priests come to trust the Lord with whom they habitually live and learn that self-surrender is the surest way to come to understand the ways of the Lord.

The spiritual life of the priest may be hindered by discouragement, by sin, by loss of fervor. Each of these and many other obstacles to self-surrender can serve to weaken a priest’s union with Christ. Time and again, however, people’s love for their priests calls the priest out of his own concerns and identifies him with the people Christ has given him to govern in love. Listening to priests speak about their parishioners is a happy experience, one for which bishops are grateful not only because they learn about their people but because they also learn about their priests. No priest is ordained without a title that tells him and the world to which people he belongs. Listening to parishioners speak about their priests confirms that identity.

The media image of the Catholic priest today is far from what it was fifty years ago. We have gone from Barry Fitzgerald to sex offender in a period that was supposed to be marked by a new springtime for the Church after the Second Vatican Council. Perhaps, in the providence of God, a great trial is necessary before it is clear that God is in charge. The priesthood is part of the constitution of the Church, a source of stability and continuity that draws fire from those who, for whatever reason, would like to see the Church retire into private experience or even disappear entirely. No matter the sins of priests and bishops, Christ governs his people, making use of priests who have come to trust him.

This book is an invitation to trust, made by an archbishop who loves his priests. It is a beautiful book, limpid and transparent in its purpose. Archbishop Sartain moves easily between personal experience and spiritual insight, strengthening the priests who will read this book. I hope many will do so.

Francis Cardinal George, OMI
Archbishop of Chicago
Feast of the Epiphany, 2012

Dedication

Out of the blue, late in the afternoon of Saturday, November 18, 1999, I received an encouraging and affirming, but uncharacteristically puzzling, e-mail from a close friend, Charlie Elmer. I was pastor of St. Louis Church in Memphis at the time, and the e-mail arrived just moments before I was to officiate a marriage. A brother priest was to concelebrate the wedding Mass, and by coincidence Charlie was also his close friend, but I chose not to mention the e-mail to him.

Charles W. Elmer was born May 19, 1923, in Aurora, Wisconsin, one of four children of John and Eva (whom Charlie always affectionately called “Mum”). The family moved to Iron Mountain, Michigan, where his parents owned a general store, above which they made their home. After graduating from Iron Mountain High School in 1941, Charlie attended the University of Wisconsin until the United States entered World War II. He joined the US Army in 1942 as part of the 430th Anti-Aircraft Battalion of the Second Armored Division. He was among the thousands of soldiers who stormed Omaha Beach in the famed D-Day invasion of Europe on June 6, 1944, and later fought in the Battle of the Bulge. He would eventually earn the rank of Colonel in the Army Reserve.

Not long before he died, he told another priest friend that, returning to the States after the war, he boarded a train in Washington for the long ride to Iron Mountain and heard the popular song, “Sentimental Journey,” playing repeatedly. Listening to the line “Gonna set my heart at ease,” he knew that his heart would not be at ease until he responded to the persistent urgings of Christ to become a priest. He entered St. Francis de Sales Seminary in Milwaukee and, after graduation, the North American College in Rome. Ordained a priest of the Diocese of Marquette on December 20, 1952, he transferred to the warmer climate of the Diocese of Austin due to asthma, a condition that dogged him the rest of his

life. At heart a parish priest, he served several parishes and led the campus ministry program at St. Mary Parish of Texas A&M University. The majority of his years as a priest, however, were spent in the formation of priests, as Assistant Superior of the Casa Santa Maria of the North American College, Business Manager of the North American College, Director of the Casa Santa Maria and the Office of US Visitors to the Vatican, spiritual director then rector of Holy Trinity Seminary in Dallas, and spiritual director at St. Mary's Seminary in Houston.

Charlie could have chosen any path in life, so great were his gifts, but God chose him to be a priest. As all of us have turning points in life, Charlie had one of his under the inspiration of St. Rita of Cascia. I was one of many invited to accompany him on his regular pilgrimages to Cascia and the shrine of St. Rita. He and I once concelebrated Mass with the local bishop and other priests, then Charlie prayed his private prayers. He told a friend that it had been at Cascia many years earlier that the Lord had given him the choice of prestige or the spiritual influence of young men. He said that choosing the latter had been the most freeing experience of his life, one that confirmed that God had called him to be a priest to help young laymen and young priests to be holy.

I came to know him in the summer of 1974, when I began my studies at the North American College. He was the *economista* (business manager) at the time, and it was clear from our first meeting that he loved seminarians and priests. The friendship which began that summer lasted the remainder of his life, until the Lord called him home September 4, 2011. I was only one of an army of priestly "sons" whom Charlie encouraged and fathered with great love, humility, directness, and humor. Indeed, though there were literally hundreds of us, each was made to feel that he was the fair-haired one, the dearest of all. We sons joked with him about that knack of his, and he never denied having it. He took us seriously—he took our vocation seriously—and we were better priests for his loving attention and his prayers. To the end, he made himself available to seminarians and priests for counsel, compassion, and confession.

We sons were as different from one another as any large group of seminarians and priests could be, yet Charlie related to each with ease, and we with him. At his funeral, some of us compared notes. He had never been one to speak at length about his past, but occasionally he would let slip the hint of a fascinating experience or life lesson.

For instance, when I returned to the seminary from a trip to the great Cathedral at Chartres one year, I gave him an enthusiastic account of the visit. He added quietly, "The first time I was at Chartres, it was June,

1944, and I was carrying a rifle, holding up behind the Cathedral." On another occasion, when he visited me at the parish in Memphis, we went to see the movie *Platoon*. On the ride back to the rectory, he was unusually quiet. As we pulled into the driveway, he said, "I had forgotten how terrible war is."

It was clear that, even though each of us knew him well, it was in speaking of him together that we learned not only of the scope of his life experience but especially of his constancy and integrity. He was not secretive but humbly guarded, and I suppose he shared with each of us what he thought would be helpful. I was the recipient of his fatherly care on occasions too numerous to recount here. He was always interested in what I was doing and how it was going. Suffice it to say that I knew he accompanied me along the priestly journey, and he was always available to guide, challenge, and encourage. There was no mistaking the fact that he loved Jesus and his Mother with all his heart, and he gave unwavering witness to the importance of being faithful to prayer.

He was tall, lean, and straight as an arrow his entire life. He ate sparingly, loved to play tennis, and enjoyed a daily, early-morning, brisk walk through Rome; it was my joy to take many walks with him through the city and its environs. During those walks we talked of serious things that mattered and frivolous things that made us laugh. Even when in his later years he slowed and stooped with the discomfort of age, he was in a deeper sense still tall and straight, a fit ascetic. He owned little, lived simply, and shared generously. He disliked the spotlight but would not hesitate to speak publicly and with determined animation of the priesthood and his love for Christ and the Church. He could appear severe, but only momentarily, because a broad, mischievous smile inevitably emerged to unmask any appearance of sternness. He was the epitome of fatherly hospitality. Even those who met him only once knew they had met a man of depth and prayer, a man of kindness and generosity, a shepherd like Jesus, a priest thoroughly.

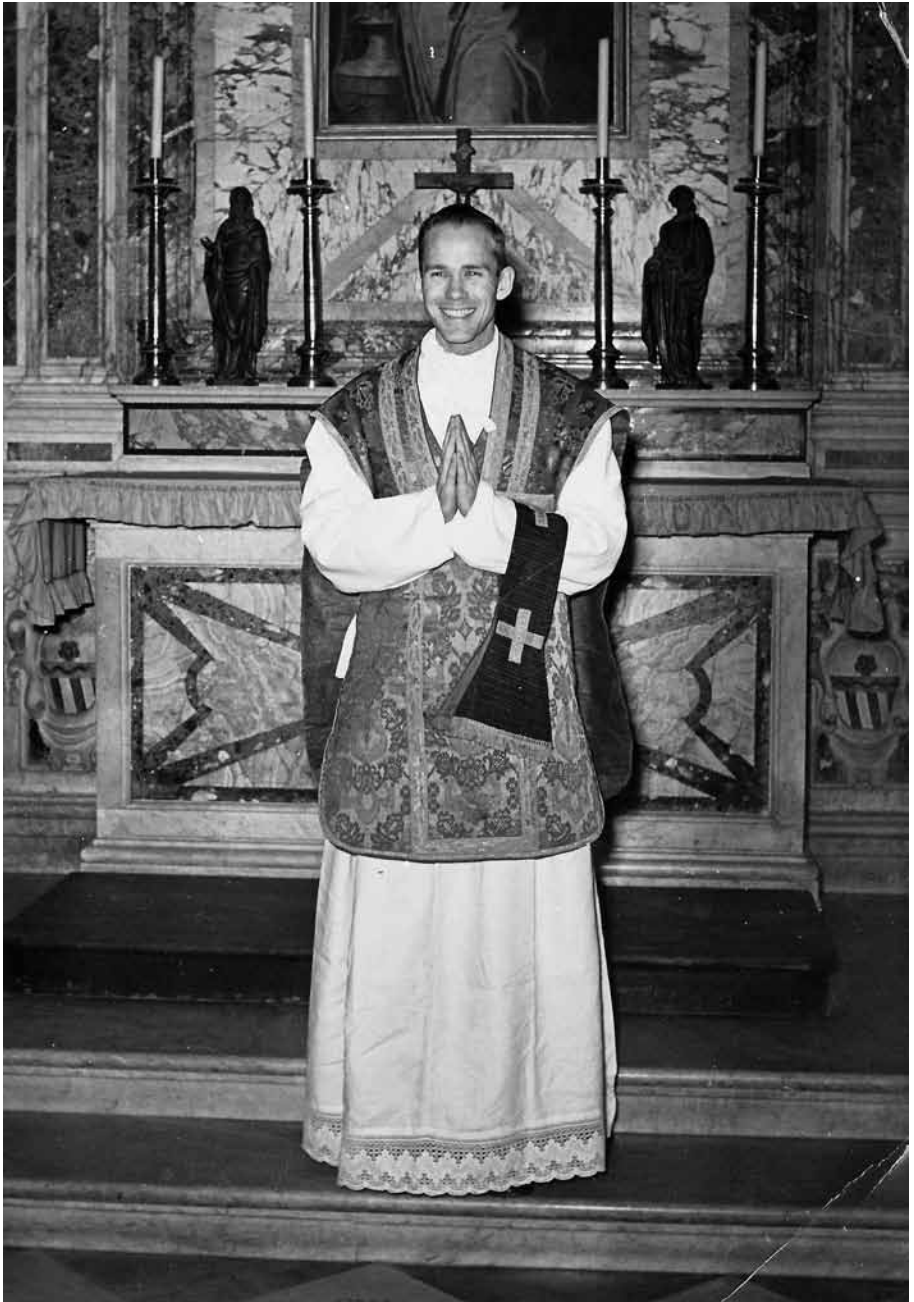
It was not unusual to receive emails from him, and they were often humorous, but never had they been puzzling like the one I received November 18, 1999:

Dear Peter: This will probably seem like an odd letter but I wanted to say a few things. First off, I want to say that you have meant a lot to me through the years. You have a special place in my heart and you are as close as I will ever [be] to having a son. Distance and time have a way of keeping us separated but never in prayer. You have

been much on my mind lately as I know a lot is happening in the Church. I guess what I want to say is to be open to the Lord's call wherever and whenever that may be. Always remember that the Lord will never let you be more generous to Him than He is to you. I have generally found that for me God's will is found in the voice of the Church and especially so if I haven't been searching for a job and especially if I would rather be left alone. Each of us is asked to carry his own cross which is as different for each of us as we are different from one another. It is in the carrying of that cross that we find our own salvation. Because our God is a God who is called LOVE, we can do nothing better in our lives than to love. It is so very important that as a pastor you have a special love for your flock—even more important is the love that a Bishop must have for his flock and above all for his priests with whom he shares his own priesthood. Peter, you are in my prayers and my heart. Charlie Elmer

A month after receiving the email, I learned from the Apostolic Nuncio that I had been named Bishop of Little Rock. Somehow Charlie had heard the news in advance and had wanted to encourage me. Though puzzled by it that first month, I printed the email and have kept it in my breviary ever since.

It is, then, in devoted memory of Monsignor Charles W. Elmer's profound love for Christ and steadfast dedication to the priesthood (and in a sense at his direction) that I offer these words of encouragement to you, *my* sons and brothers in the Lord.



Ordination of Reverend Charles W. Elmer, December 20, 1952.

Introduction: Strengthen Your Brothers

Dear Brothers in the Lord,

It struck me one evening not long after Pope Benedict XVI's 2008 visit to the United States that the words of Jesus to Simon are also his words to me as bishop and to you as brothers in the Lord. I began to consider writing a periodic message of encouragement to the priests of the Diocese of Joliet, and the idea seemed right. I pondered my own experiences as a priest, situations I have faced and face still, interior struggles in which I find myself engaged, moments of unexpected grace, lessons learned by the hardest, the joy that arises from loving and serving God's people, and the intimate link between priesthood and the cross. As I thought about all these things and more, I sensed the Lord saying to me: "Strengthen your brothers."

Thus from time to time I write simple and (I hope) helpful meditations on various aspects of our priestly lives—now for the priests of the Archdiocese of Seattle, but previously for those in the Diocese of Joliet. I keep a running list of potential topics, most unconnected to any particular occasion but simply reflections on situations we face, goals we strive to achieve, and graces God extends to us.

The context of the gospel verse on which I base the theme of these reflections is, of course, the Last Supper. In the course of the meal "an argument broke out among them about which of them should be regarded as the greatest." Jesus identified himself as the servant in their midst. Knowing that shortly Simon would turn away from him in denial, Jesus also knew that he would "turn back," and that, having turned back, he was to strengthen his brothers.

To personalize that context, let me say that the reflections I offer are from one who must “turn back” every day from his own denial, shortsightedness, selfishness, sin, and fear—to be strengthened by the Lord.

Luke is careful, and not in the least subtle, to remind us that the scene of Jesus’ admonition to Simon and the others is the Last Supper. The Eucharist is the greatest source of priestly grace, strength, and encouragement—and ironically, by that very fact it is also the place where we confront our greatest need for mercy.

It is for that reason that my first encouragement to you, brothers in the Lord, is also the most important I will offer in this book: to celebrate Mass every day. The Eucharist is the essential environment in which we minister: from the Lord’s table and his cross, to the midst of his people and all that our engagement with them entails, and back to his table and his cross. The efficacy of our day comes purely and entirely from his sacrifice. In fact, as I will suggest in another letter, priesthood is ministry *from the cross*.¹

Father Paul Murray, OP, writes that when we receive the Body of the Lord, “we begin already, in some measure, to experience the joy of eternal life.” Moreover, the phrase “Give us this day our daily bread” in the Lord’s Prayer “contains in itself already an eternal day, even the promised day of resurrection.” He quotes the *Catena Aurea* of St. Thomas Aquinas, in which is included a beautiful text from Pseudo-Augustine:

It is not the [ordinary] bread which goes into our body, but the bread of everlasting life which gives support to the substance of our soul. . . . Take daily what profits you for the day, and so live that you may be worthy to receive. The death of the Lord is signified [by this bread], and the remission of sins. Whoever has a wound looks for medicine, and the wound is that we are under sin. The medicine is this heavenly and awesome sacrament. If you receive daily, daily does “Today” come to you. Christ is to you “Today.” Christ rises to you daily.²

Poor, hungry men, we go to the altar every day to offer ourselves, to give thanks, and to be fed. Smiling, and with his hand on our shoulders, the Lord sends us to do his work—and accompanies us. He strengthens us that we might strengthen others.

It is my hope that these reflections speak to you of God’s love and the beauty of our vocation in Christ, that they give you strength and hope, and that in a way uniquely suited to you, they help deepen your relationship with the Lord. May he be to us all the bread of “Today.” May he rise

in us “Today.” And may he be, from the tips of our toes to the top of our heads and to the depth of our souls, our very “Today.”

Sincerely in Christ,

Archbishop Peter Sartain

Notes

1. Letter 4, “Ministry From The Cross,” pp. 23–26.
2. Paul Murray, OP, *Praying with Confidence: Aquinas on the Lord’s Prayer* (London: Continuum, 2010), 70.

PRIESTLY IDENTITY IN CHRIST

1

With Boldness Unfettered

Dear Brothers in the Lord,

Get ready for a long journey. I'm about to take you from Memphis to Sheba to Seattle, and I hope you will bear with me.

After a visit to Memphis in 1988 at the invitation of then-Bishop Daniel Buechlein, Mother Teresa decided to open a shelter for homeless women and their children in the city. As chancellor for the diocese I was one of the point-persons for logistics, and in the process I got to know the regional superior of the Missionaries of Charity.

One day in late 1989, she called me. "Father, would you give two retreats to our sisters in North Yemen?" *North Yemen*? Incredulous, I told her I would consider the request but must ask the bishop's permission. With his nod, I said "yes" and started making arrangements for the trip the following March.

Someone suggested I call the American Embassy in Sana'a, the capital. Several years later, and much to my surprise, I came across the notes I had taken during that telephone conversation with a very helpful consul in Sana'a, Deborah.

At the top of the sheet I had written the date (1-20-90) and the embassy telephone number. Then, in short phrases, I had jotted down the following notes, based on Deborah's stern counsel:

Bring minimum religious paraphernalia required. If asked religion, say, "Devout Christian." Occupation—not priest but something else.

On visa application, mark “visitor”—don’t put “priest.” No religious clothes. \$150.00 to exchange immediately upon arrival. Cash better than traveler’s checks. No credit cards. Altitude can exacerbate high blood pressure. Drink only bottled water and lots of it. Eat nothing fresh. Bring diarrhea medicine. *Conditions very primitive* [emphasis hers]. Few toilets. . . . Come to new embassy to register immediately upon arriving. Immunizations? *“Everything is rampant: meningitis, polio, typhus, typhoid, cholera, yellow fever, malaria, leprosy”* [again, emphasis hers].

On the day of my departure, I knew I was in for an adventure and took a deep breath. My mother worried. The bishop laughed.

Two days and multiple stops later, I arrived in Sana’a well after midnight. The sisters were there to greet me, and I spied their smiling faces through the fences as I nervously made my way through passport control and customs. As we drove through the deserted streets, I realized with deep apprehension that I was a visitor to another world, and the feeling only intensified as the moments went by. The sisters, completely at home in these surroundings but full of advice about what I should and should not do, took me to the house where I would be staying and left me alone. I went to bed.

When I awoke later that morning, I felt disoriented in a manner and to a degree I had never felt before: out-of-place, uneasy, alien, and alone. Since the sisters were to pick me up soon to celebrate Mass at the convent, I studied the Lectionary and began putting some thoughts together for the homily. The day’s gospel reading was Matthew 12:38-42.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.” He said to them in reply, “An evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. At the judgment, the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and there is something greater than Jonah here. At the judgment the queen of the south will arise with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and there is something greater than Solomon here.”

The footnote in my Bible indicated, matter-of-factly: “The queen of the south came from Sheba, modern-day Yemen.”

I shook my head in disbelief, smiled at the providential irony and thought: “Three thousand years ago, a wealthy queen from this very place travelled a world away to seek the unsurpassed wisdom of Solomon. And I am here with Wisdom from Someone greater than Solomon.” This simple realization helped reorient me by giving me confidence in the Gospel I had come to preach. Truthfully, after I celebrated Mass for the sisters a few hours later, my anxiety diminished significantly.

I love the Book of Jonah, with its fantastic imagery and humor. Reading it, I think of southern Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor’s outlandish—at times grotesque—exaggerations. As O’Connor saw it, she had a point to make, and only hyperbole would adequately express it. I think it was the same for the sacred author of Jonah. The reluctant prophet had run from God’s call because he judged the mission to be quixotic, even ludicrous: “Preach conversion to the *Ninevites*? God must be kidding or out of his mind,” he reasoned. God had the last laugh, of course, because when Jonah did eventually take up his mission and preach, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed,” it took merely a day for the Ninevites to believe God. The king decreed a kingdom-wide fast of repentance for human and animal alike, hoping that God would “relent and forgive, and withhold his blazing wrath, so that we might not perish.” Seeing the people’s repentance, God did not carry out the destruction he had sent Jonah to proclaim as a warning. Incredibly, Jonah was miffed at what he saw as God’s reckless display of mercy. Who, then, was in greater need of conversion: the Ninevites or Jonah? God had more lessons to teach him, and chief among them was this—do not confuse your reluctance to preach God’s Word with the people’s readiness to receive it.

Jesus used the stories of the Queen of Sheba and Jonah to expose the unadulterated stubbornness of the scribes and Pharisees. He reminded them that even notorious pagans had once sought and listened to Solomon’s wisdom and repented at Jonah’s reluctant preaching. Why were these scribes and Pharisees so trapped in their disbelief, so stubborn in their blind refusal to see that he was greater than Solomon? The inescapable truth they refused to face was the true identity of Jesus, the unadulterated truth of his teaching. Even the Queen of Sheba and the Ninevites would have caught on.

It was when I reflected on the speed with which the Ninevites accepted Jonah’s preaching that I remembered that morning in Sana’a in 1990. Jesus had brought the two images together to teach that we can have complete confidence in God’s power at work in the preaching of the

Gospel. There's a bit of Jonah's reluctance in every preacher of the Word: "What if they reject this extraordinary message, this challenging teaching, this preacher himself?" When we allow the fear of rejection to shake our confidence or dilute the Word, God says: "Don't forget the Ninevites. Don't forget the Queen of Sheba. Don't forget the determination of my Son, who placed total confidence in me. Trust the Word and preach it with confidence and boldness, love and humility, despite your fear and hesitation."

I love this excerpt—at once fiery and touching—from the writings of St. Francis of Assisi. After sharply instructing his readers about the menace of evil and the need to repent, he takes a tender turn.

In the love which is God we beg all those whom these words reach to receive those fragrant words of our Lord Jesus Christ written above with divine love and kindness. *And let whoever does not know how to read have them read to them frequently* [emphasis mine]. Because they are spirit and life, they should preserve them together with a holy activity to the end.¹

Francis had complete confidence in the Word. He himself had been converted by it, and he knew that its words of spirit and life must be preached boldly, confidently, lovingly, and constantly for the sake of all—even read, frequently, to those who cannot read. It is an act of tender love to read to another. Don't parents read lovingly to their little ones, even read the same favorite story over and over? The Word will do its work, but it must be proclaimed, even when we ourselves are skeptical of its demands and implausible hope.

It seems to me that among the characteristics called for by the New Evangelization, the most important are delight, awe, wonder, adoration, confidence, boldness, humility, and love. These are the very qualities that marked the preaching of Sts. Peter and Paul.

Several years ago, while visiting the Capitoline Museum in Rome, I discovered Pompeo Batoni's *Holy Family*. At that time the painting was hanging in a grand staircase, and as I ascended the stairs I was immediately captivated by the magnificent expression on Joseph's face. The word I think best describes his expression is *delight*. Joseph is full of delight as he looks at Jesus and Mary. They are the major figures in the painting, but Joseph's facial expression captures an important element for all preaching and teaching: loving delight in the mystery of salvation in Christ Jesus.



Pompeo Batoni, *The Holy Family*,
c. 1760. Oil on canvas, 99 x 74 cm.
The Capitoline Museums, Rome.

Paul was constantly in awe that he, a former persecutor and “the very least of all the holy ones,” had been given a special grace “for your benefit,” a revelation and insight into the mystery of Christ, a grace “to preach to the Gentiles the inscrutable riches of Christ, and to bring to light [for all] what is the plan of the mystery hidden from ages past in God who created all things (Eph 3:1-9). So overpowering was this grace that he would write, “Woe to me if I do not preach the [gospel]!” (1 Cor 9:16). But even as he delighted in this unexpected grace and reflected on the fact that he had no choice but to do what God asked of him, he realized how far he had to go personally (“Miserable one that I am!” Rom 7:24).

We priests of the Word must ourselves be so captivated by the mystery of faith that our delight in the mystery shines with infectious joy in all we do. Delight is evidenced in wonder, awe, enthusiasm, and love. It is seasoned with the humble acknowledgment that we are sinners, works in progress. It is fed and grows in silent contemplation, prayer, and adoration. It is wonder that literally never ceases.

And, as St. Paul knew well, because it is above all the recognition that with God everything is grace, delight gives birth to confidence and boldness. According to the New Testament, such confident boldness is the gift of the Spirit.

Paul decides to write boldly to the Christians at Rome precisely because God had *graced* him with the office of Apostle to the Gentiles. In fact, he understands his ministry as that of a priest in service to the Messiah, preparing the Gentiles as a worthy offering to God. In his priestly service, slaughtered animals would be replaced by a repentant people. Moreover, he finds full confidence in the new covenant. Whereas Moses veiled his face and the glory shining on it—"its glory that was going to fade"—Paul writes that "since we have such hope, we act very boldly and not like Moses," because "whenever a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed" (2 Cor 3:11-16). "All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). He is amazed, in awe, in adoration, delighted—and *very* bold. God's grace, the blood of a new covenant in Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit make him so.

After healing a crippled beggar "in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean," Peter began teaching the gathering crowd, upsetting the priests, temple guard, and Sadducees. Peter and John were taken into custody until the next day, when they were brought into the presence of leaders, elders, scribes, and high priests for interrogation. By what power or by what name had they accomplished this healing? Peter, "filled with the holy Spirit," answered them with such confidence that "Observing the boldness of Peter and John and perceiving them to be uneducated, ordinary men, they were amazed, and they recognized them as companions of Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

Realizing that Peter and John would not and could not stop speaking "about what we have seen and heard," the leaders released them with a warning.

After their release they went back to their own people and reported what the chief priests and elders had told them. And when they heard it, they raised their voices to God with one accord: . . . "And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and enable your servants to speak your word with all boldness, as you stretch forth [your] hand to heal, and signs and wonders are done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." As they prayed, the place where they were gathered shook, and they were all filled with the holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:20-31)

The Acts of the Apostles and virtually all New Testament letters refer to this same boldness and confidence which are the work of the Holy

Spirit through faith in Christ. This gift of the Spirit—this Truth who is Christ—this power from Christ’s death and resurrection—empower the apostles to continue preaching despite every opposition and personal fear. Because it is literally God’s work for which they are mere servants, they can do their part confidently and leave the results (mysterious in themselves) to God.

Therefore, since we have this ministry through the mercy shown us, we are not discouraged. . . . For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for the sake of Jesus. For God who said, “Let light shine out in darkness,” has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of [Jesus] Christ.

But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. . . .

So death is at work in us, but life in you. Since, then, we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I believed, therefore I spoke,” we too believe and therefore we speak, knowing that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and place us with you in his presence. . . .

Therefore, we are not discouraged. (2 Cor 4:1-16)

There is one attitude that must never appear in any effort of the New Evangelization: *arrogance*. Arrogance is a counter-sign to the Gospel and justly repels those who truly thirst for God. With Paul, “we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord.” “I will not dare to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me” (Rom 15:18). The arrogant preacher preaches not Christ but himself. Run from arrogance.

Another reason for confidence, according to St. Paul, is that God is at work in those who thirst for and listen to his Word. “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6). “We are confident of you in the Lord that what we instruct you, you [both] are doing and will continue to do” (2 Thess 3:4). “I myself am convinced about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness” (Rom 15:14).

Amid this talk of confidence and boldness, it is important to reflect on an intriguing and inescapable aspect of the call to teach and preach the Word: the mystery of rejection. Blessed John Paul II once wrote that after some initial success preaching to the Athenians, who were fascinated with his reference to “an unknown God,” Paul evoked their fearsome protest when he mentioned the resurrection. But he was not deterred.

The apostle then understood that the mystery of salvation in Christ would not be easily accepted by the Greeks, accustomed as they were to mythology and to various forms of philosophical speculation. Nevertheless, he did not lay down his weapons. After his setback at Athens, he nonetheless continued with *holy stubbornness* to proclaim the Gospel to every creature. This holy stubbornness finally led him to Rome, where he met his death.²

Why does God permit some to reject his Word, to reject the gift of faith? If the message is for all, why will some never hear it? This mystery reflects God’s respect for human freedom, his patience, and the deeper, hidden working of his grace. When we see him face-to-face, then we will understand. Until then, he gives the Church holy stubbornness to persevere.

There is indeed a bit of Jonah’s reluctance in all of us. We can be tempted to timidity when preaching the Word, fearing rejection or wondering if the scandals that have rocked the Church in recent years have destroyed our credibility or the credibility of the Word itself. Will people even listen? We might ask rhetorically whether it is too late to preach the Word in our secular culture, whether people have moved definitively and permanently away from the things of God.

But we preach not ourselves but Jesus, the Word of the Father, who sends the Holy Spirit not only to us who preach but also to those who hear.

I have long been fascinated by the way Luke ends the Acts of the Apostles. Having preached and healed in the name of Jesus with much success and much rejection, having found himself literally in chains for having done what the Lord sent him to do, having survived shipwreck and the mean-spirited manipulation of those who actively worked against the Word of God, having escaped the deadly threat of a viper clinging to his hand, Paul finds himself in Rome under benign house arrest, allowed to preach in peace to those who come to him. Here he was, in the capital of the ancient world, and Luke thus reminds us that

the Word had spread to “the ends of the earth.” But the end of Acts is in fact open-ended: “He remained for two full years in his lodgings. He received all who came to him, and with complete assurance and without hindrance he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (28:30-31).

Some have suggested that the final verse could be appropriately translated: “he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ *with boldness unfettered*.”

My brothers in the Lord, as God unfolds for us his desires for the New Evangelization, my prayer is that both as individual priests and as a presbyterate we will grow in our delight in the mystery of faith, our trust in the Gospel who is Christ Jesus, our humble confidence and boldness in preaching the Word in this very secular culture, our love for every person in this part of the Lord’s vineyard, our spirit of sacrifice which flows from and back to the Eucharist, and our prayerful adoration of the One who loves us with infinite love.

And may we never forget that as we preach the powerful and challenging Word of God in this place, the likes of the wealthy Queen of Sheba, the fearsome Ninevites, the fanatical Saul, and the youthful Francesco Bernardone are listening—thirsting—for the Truth we bear in earthen vessels. Remember what God can do with a mustard seed, a little yeast, a grain of wheat. Some will reject him, but think what will happen in those who receive him. May we live and preach the Word with boldness unfettered. God’s Word will do his work.

I can offer no better advice to end this letter than that which St. Catherine of Siena offered to her close friend, Fra Bartolomeo Dominici:

And so set yourself
to do everything bravely,
and drive out darkness
and establish light
without considering
your weakness.
But believe that
through Christ Crucified
you can do everything.³

Sincerely in Christ,
Archbishop Peter Sartain

P.S. Two months after I returned home a few pounds lighter, North Yemen reunited with South Yemen, healing a breach that had existed since the nineteenth century. A priest friend in Memphis sent me a note of congratulations, crediting me with the feat. I thanked him. The Yemeni visa stamped in my passport aroused suspicion at every port of entry for several years until that passport expired.

Notes

1. Saint Francis of Assisi, "Earlier Exhortation," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman, and William J. Short (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 44.

2. His Holiness John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 106–7.

3. Saint Catherine of Siena, Letter T200, author's translation.