

# BEING CATHOLIC TODAY

Catholic Identity in an Age of Challenge

A PASTORAL LETTER  
to the  
CLERGY, RELIGIOUS  
and LAITY  
of the  
ARCHDIOCESE OF  
WASHINGTON  
and  
ALL WHO READ  
THIS LETTER

by  
HIS EMINENCE  
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WUERL  
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WASHINGTON





# Being Catholic





# Today





Grace  
and peace  
to you  
in Christ.





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# Introduction



“We are all brothers and sisters because we are all members of God’s family.”

**E**ach of us has a name. It is how we are known. To the world around us, our name identifies us, it says who we are. But there is more to the identity of each one of us than just our own personal name.

There is a distinctive American discourse about “identity.” Our media commonly speak of “identity politics,” “identity advocacy,” and even “identity theft.” People rally around ethnic identity, racial identity, regional identity, and party identity. They look to factors like these because they wish to have objective markers in answering the question, “Who am I?”

Some time ago, as I stood at the back of a church greeting members of the parish after Mass, a family approached and its youngest member asked me, “Why do you call us brothers and sisters? You’re not my brother.”

I said to him, “There is a sense in which we are all brothers and sisters, because we are all members of God’s family.” He looked at me then looked at his mother. When she nodded her head affirmatively, he turned back to me and said, “Wow, I didn’t know that,”

offering his youthful declaration of approval.

This pastoral letter is about who we are as Catholics. We will reflect on our identity as disciples of Jesus – followers of Christ – adopted children of God. As Christians, we believe that there are deep and reliable answers to the perennial questions of self-identity as well as how we should live and what values grow out of our identity and form the basis for our choices.

Identity is a theme to which Pope Francis has returned often in his daily preaching.<sup>1</sup> He speaks of Catholics, metaphorically, as having a certain “identity card,” as valuable and consequential as a passport or a driver’s license. Our legal documents record important details such as our eye color, hair color, and home address. These details matter to us, but they are superficial; they can change over time. Pope Francis, however, speaking from the Catholic tradition, is more concerned, as we are in this letter, about an identity that is essential, enduring, and true. We must talk about the identity we receive in baptism. It cannot be taken away from us. It is permanent. Indeed, it is all we can hope to keep at the end of our earthly life.

In **chapter one**, we will examine more closely this extraordinary gift of new life through baptism. Through the unique gift of baptism, in divine mercy, our identity as planned by God is reestablished. We are reborn (John 3:3-5). In baptism, we come to share in Jesus’ life and death. We are “buried with him,” says Saint Paul, and so we also rise with him to a new life

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, his morning meditations from June 9, 2014, September 26, 2014, and February 10, 2015.



(Romans 6:4). Christ's life is our life and it is a divine life because we are partakers of his "divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), as he has partaken of our human nature.

**Chapter two** offers some reflections on what it means to be a member of God's family, the Church. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are united so closely to Jesus that we are actually identified with him. We are incorporated into the Church, his Body in the world today.

Then in **chapter three**, we will look at some of the signs or ways by which we can see the presence of the Church and our identity as its members. If we call ourselves Christian, then Christ must be recognizable in us, both personally and in the institutions of his Church.

This is so because we are also baptized into the mission of Jesus. He tells us he is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6), the light of the world who testifies to the truth which sets us free from sin and death and brings hope to a humanity struggling in a dark world (John 8:12, 32, 18:37). To be his disciple is to do the same.

**Chapter four** provides some observations on what our choice to be a follower of Jesus entails. The Church, of which we are members, exists to evangelize, to invite people to an encounter with Jesus. This is her nature – this is "her deepest identity," affirmed Blessed Paul VI. The Church is founded by Christ to share the Good News of his liberating truth and saving love and thereby reconcile humanity with God (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 14).

"The Church... exists to evangelize, to invite people to an encounter with Jesus."



We will address in **chapter five** the heart of our message today, God's mercy. In God's plan, we are each called to love him and one another in truth, as a family (Matthew 22:37-40). Our original parents, however, were led astray by a lie. They turned away from truth in turning away from God. They were not honest with themselves in their identity as children of a loving Father. We call this failure original sin. Its effects are well known because each of us can put ourselves first instead of God. We are impaired in our ability to know what truth is and fully be ourselves as God made us to be. However, God is always good, merciful and loving. We were not left alone to make our way without hope or help. What was lost in sin is restored to us by Christ and in Christ.

In the following **chapters, six and seven** respectively, we can reflect on our freedom to be who we are as followers of Christ, and some of the challenges of our age as we try to

live and share our faith. In our age as in every age, the Good News and the Church as its messenger can be challenged and even distorted from both outside and inside. This is not new. Even Saint Paul warned the early Church of this when he wrote the Galatians, "there are some who are disturbing you and wish to pervert the gospel of Christ" (1:7).

In **chapter eight**, I touch on the situation the Church faces today that reflects a strong animus against what we believe and our right to follow our faith convictions. It is seen in the new discrimination today called by the name "anti-discrimination."

Finally in the last **chapters, nine and ten**, I ask us to look at our freedom to be who we are and our contribution to the wider community.

It is against all of this background that we are called now to examine our own Christian identity. What does it mean to be a Catholic?

"God is always good, merciful and loving. We were not left alone to make our way without hope or help. What was lost in sin is restored to us by Christ and in Christ."







## Chapter One

### Baptism and the Uniqueness of being Incorporated into the Body of Christ

A favorite stop on pilgrimages to Rome is the magnificent Baptistry of the Basilica of Saint John Lateran. Built in the fourth century, the Baptistry was where Christian converts were reborn in the waters of new life. Above the font is this inspiring inscription: “The brood born here to live in heaven has life from water and the nurturing Spirit. Sinner, seek your cleansing in this stream that takes the old and gives a new person back...Children of the water, think no more of earth; heaven will give you joy; in heaven hope. Think not of your sins too many or too great: birth in this stream is birth to holiness.”

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of baptism as the “plunge” into the waters symbolizing the person’s burial into Christ’s death, “from which he rises up by resurrection with him as a new creature” (1214). By this sacrament, all sin – original and personal – is washed away and the person is permanently marked with the sign of Christ. Just as in the beginning, when God created everything and sent his Spirit to form out of nothing everything that was to be, so in his new creation the Spirit is sent to bring forth a whole new level of life in each believer – life in the Spirit.





Being made into a “new creation” speaks of the new character one receives in baptism. Once cleansed of sin and restored to a state of grace, we become God’s adopted children, “heir of all things” (Hebrews 1:2). Baptized into Christ, we are one with him and incorporated into his Body.

Saint John Paul II noted, “Since the ‘Good News’ is Christ, there is an identity between the message and the messenger, between saying, doing and being. His power, the secret of the effectiveness of his actions, lies in his total identification with the message he announces; he proclaims the ‘Good News’ not just by what he says or does, but by what he is” (*Redemptoris missio*, 13). As the Body of Christ in the world, there is likewise in the Church “an identity between the message and the messenger, between saying, doing and being.”

This linkage between the person baptized and Jesus – between the message and the messenger – is not just a matter of our own personal salvation. It is not only an action of personal piety. Rather, we are engaged

in a new life of the Spirit so that working in and through us, the Spirit might transform the whole world. Being a Catholic means to recognize a unique and special relationship with Jesus risen from the dead, and his mission to bring everything to God the Father. We are not bystanders but rather participants in this work.

“In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples,” Pope Francis affirms. “All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization. . . Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 120).

Our Holy Father is making the point that all the baptized, not just the clergy, share responsibility for the primary mission of the Church to evangelize and share our faith with the world. Baptism gives each of us a common identity and role in the life and mission of the Church. We each have a part to play.

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*Evangelii Gaudium*, 120

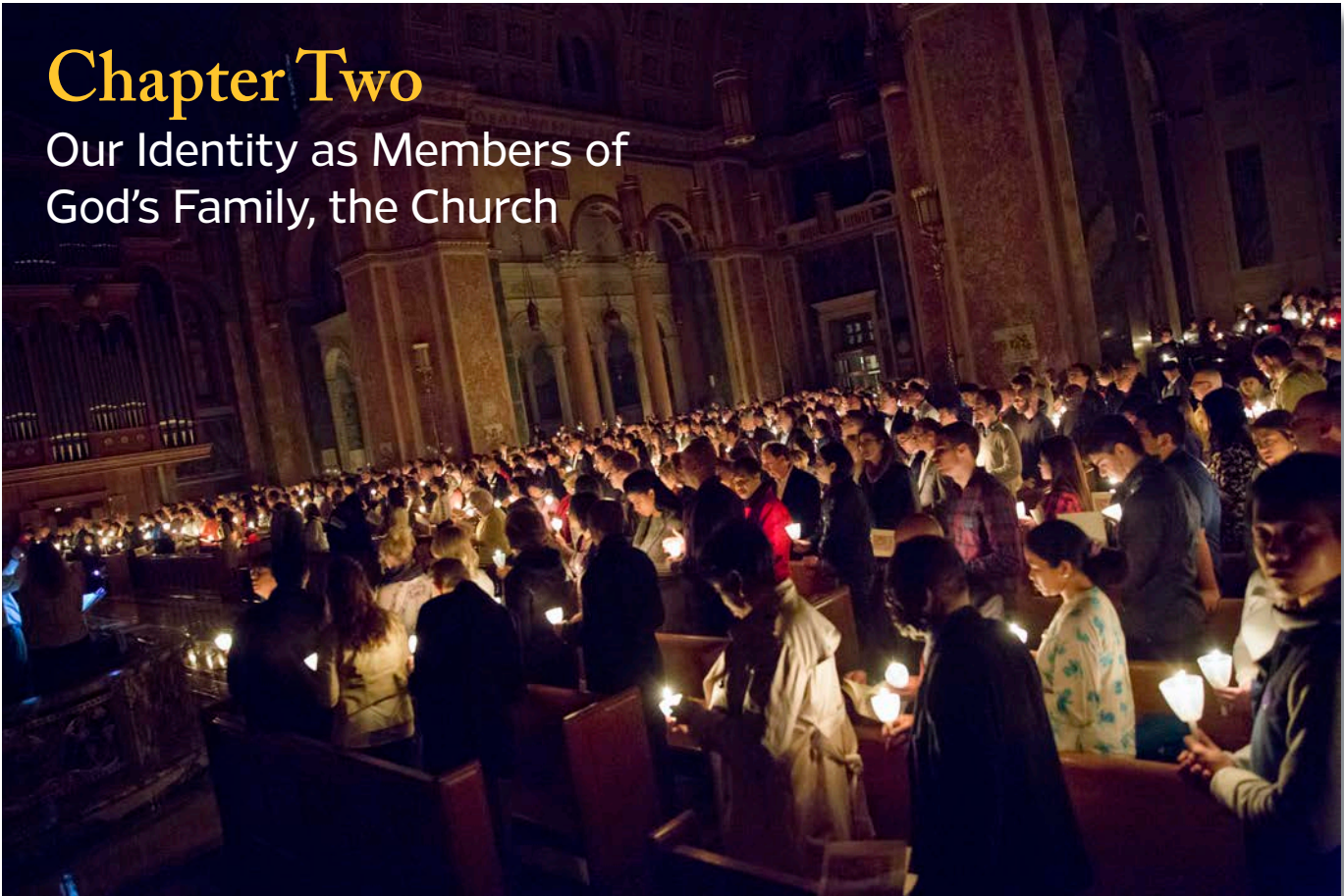






## Chapter Two

### Our Identity as Members of God's Family, the Church



When Jesus came to save us, his Apostles spoke of salvation in family terms. They presented Jesus as a bridegroom, and the Church as his bride (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:31-32; and Revelation 19:7). They identified members of the Church as Jesus' brothers and sisters (Romans 8:29).

As Catholics, we do not make our way through life alone, but as members of God's family, his Church. Its members, those baptized into the life of Christ, are brothers and sisters with each other and form a body with Christ as its head. The Catholic Church is the living and saving presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

In a pastoral letter, *The Church: Our Spiritual Home*, I reflected more at

length on this article of the Creed. The Church was established to be God's family; and as a family it has a certain recognizable form. It is distinguishable from other institutions and associations. The Church is a family that can be identified by distinctive characteristics it has had since the start of its life — a beginning we find described in the Bible's account of the first Christian Pentecost and the days that followed (Acts 2-4).

At that first Pentecost the Spirit fell upon everyone, but gave different gifts to different people. Peter preached in the name of the Church. Peter and the Apostles emerged also as the Church's primary healers, teachers, rulers, judges, and administrators. Gradually, but still in the New Testament era, we find the offices of bishop (1 Timothy

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*(Lumen gentium, 1).*



3:1-2), presbyter (James 5:14), and deacon (Philippians 1:1). When Saint Ignatius of Antioch writes letters to the churches of Asia Minor in 107 A.D., he assumes that all of the congregations have this same structure.

Sometimes we can get a better picture of something once we know precisely what it is not. The Church is not a business, a club, or a special-interest group. The Church is not the result of like-minded people coming together and deciding to form an organization, nor are her moral teachings decided by popular vote or societal trends.

The Catholic Church is not a man-made institution at all. Her origins are found in the will and actions of Christ. The Church, a people gathered into the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ as a sacrament – a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all people (Lumen gentium, 1).

Her hierarchical structures and charter come from Jesus, who announced, “You are Peter and upon this rock I will

build my church” (Matthew 16:18). The Lord established his Church on this foundation rock – Saint Peter, the first pope – to ensure that each subsequent generation would have the opportunity to hear of his kingdom, to know his Gospel and to receive his invitation to follow him, as well as the assurance of knowing that what they hear is true. Jesus chose Peter and the other Apostles and charged them and their successors with the responsibility of passing on the Good News, making sure that it is presented clearly and applied to the problems and needs of the day. Catholics recognize in Peter, who today bears the name Francis, the touchstone that keeps us in contact with the truth of divine revelation entrusted to the Apostles.

Every time we make the profession of faith, we say, “We believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” Here we are simply affirming that we are Catholics and that Christ is present in his Church, as we also renew our dedication and offer our fidelity to the Church that brings us his truth and love every day. The Catholic Church is also the home of the seven sacraments – Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony. The sacraments continue visibly to manifest and effect the saving work of Christ in our world and in the lives of the faithful, giving us the grace to live the Gospel.

To be a Catholic is to recognize the role of the Church as the very means created and given to us by Jesus so that his work, accomplished in his death and Resurrection, might be re-presented in our day and applied to us.







## Chapter Three

### Signs of the Presence of the Church



**Y**ears ago, in an effort to provide a fuller vision of life to a group of youngsters whose experience was confined to the inner city, we organized a day trip to the country. The day began with a breakfast that included genuine freshly-squeezed orange juice. Cautiously taking a sip, many of the children asked, “What is this stuff?” When told it was orange juice, they simply said, “No it isn’t.”

They had never known the real thing. The only experience they had of anything approximating orange juice was an artificial “orange-flavored drink” sometimes given as part of the

free breakfast program. That occasion comes to mind when I reflect on the limited and even contrived version of our faith that some people hold.

“Established by Christ as a communion of life, charity and truth,” the Second Vatican Council instructs, the Church “is also used by Him as an instrument for the redemption of all, and is sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth” (*Lumen gentium*, 9).

In the Rite of baptism we hear the words, “As Christ was anointed priest, prophet and king so may you live always as a member of his body sharing

“We experience the source and summit of our Catholic faith at Mass, when we receive Jesus in the Eucharist.”





“We are called to manifest the kingdom of God not merely within our church buildings, but out in the world, building up the common good.”

everlasting life.” Pope Benedict XVI explained that “the Church’s deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*)” (*Deus caritas est*, 25). While some in our society would limit the exercise of our Catholic faith to our houses of worship, Pope Benedict XVI made clear that “these duties presuppose each other and are

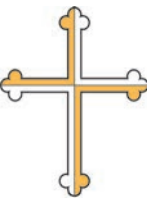
inseparable” (Id.).

We are called to manifest the kingdom of God not merely within our church buildings, but out in the world, building up the common good. When we correspond to God’s grace, we are extending the kingdom, we are able to be the image of Christ to all those we encounter – in his love, in his truth, in his mercy, and in his justice, making a gift of ourselves in service to communion with God and one another.

One of the great voices of African Christianity in the second century, Tertullian, noted that Christians wore charity like a brand upon their bodies. As slaves bore the brand marks of their owners, so Christians bore the mark of God’s love. He wrote: “it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. ‘Look,’ they say, ‘how they love one another ... and how they are ready to die for each other.’” (Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 39.7.) He does not speak in pious generalities, but lists the specific ways that Christians habitually helped others, even at the risk of their own lives. Christians “supply the wants of destitute orphans, and of old persons who are homebound; those who have suffered shipwreck, or have been condemned to the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in prisons,” (*Ibid*, 39.6.)

This was the public work that, like the Creed and the sacraments, set Catholics apart and gave them their identity in second century North Africa. They were known by their charitable love. A writer in the city of Rome, Saint Justin Martyr, confirms





Tertullian's claim by an almost identical list of charitable deeds (Saint Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 67.) Love, shown in action, was a universal mark of Christian faith in those earliest years of the Church's life.

Pope Francis often calls on the faithful to "go forth" and be Spirit-filled missionary disciples, bringing Christ's love and hope to the poor and forgotten, especially those on the margins of society, and also our family members, friends and coworkers, and all the people we meet. This is what we do; this is who we are.

Our understanding of the nature and significance of the Church explains why the missionary activity of the Church is essential to her identity. An encounter with Jesus, which we experience in God's Word, the sacraments, and our works of charity, can transform our hearts, and inspire us to change our world. We experience the source and summit of our Catholic faith at Mass, when we receive Jesus in the Eucharist. Then at the end of the liturgy, we are called to "go forth" and bring the Lord's truth and love to the world.

This basic Catholic instinct has led, down through history, to the development of institutions now considered indispensable to civilization. It was the Church that established what developed into the modern university and hospital systems. Modern-day music, art, architecture, economics, philosophy, and our legal system all have their roots in the Catholic Church. Concepts such as natural rights and social equality, not to mention the idea that

government and religion are separate spheres, were developed in Catholic thought. It was Catholics supported by the Church — with its refreshing ideas that faith and reason are complementary and that the universe is orderly — who often led the way in the sciences, including astronomy, cosmology, physics, chemistry, genetics, optics, and seismology.

Where the impact of well-articulated faith based principles most evidently helped to form public policy in the United States are in the areas of labor relations, working conditions and a number of other social justice issues.

The reason *Rerum novarum*, the encyclical letter by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, which concentrated on the Church's understanding of the dignity of workers and their rights, is highlighted so regularly is because it was the beginning of a long series of papal encyclicals and statements constantly developing the theme that work is an integral part of the human experience and workers have an innate human dignity and the rights that accompany it.

Saint John Paul II, on the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, wrote an encyclical *Centessimus annus*, where he says we are "To show the fruitfulness of the principles enunciated by Leo XIII, which belong to the Church's doctrinal patrimony, and as such involve the exercise of her teaching office" (3.5). What Saint John Paul II is proclaiming is that it is the duty of the magisterium to enunciate the Church's social teaching, not as an option for the believer, but as a guide for his or her life.

"An encounter with Jesus, which we experience in God's word, the sacraments, and our works of charity, can transform our hearts, and inspire us to change our world."



# Chapter Four

## Catholic Identity and Witness



"If one becomes a member of the Church, he or she is expected to believe what the Church believes and attempt to live it out as best he or she can."

Often times when I am out in public, at an airport or a store, someone I have never met will come up to me and ask me questions about the faith. Or they will simply address me, "Hello, Father." I don't need to ask them, "How did you know I am a priest?" The Roman collar that I and other priests wear identifies me.

We do not all put on a collar or wear a distinctive religious habit, but all are called to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus (Romans 13:14). We can all manifest Christ's kingdom of truth and love and by this, we will be known as his disciples (John 13:35).

Within a Christianity that spans the globe with more than two billion members – some of whom are not fully within the communion of the Catholic Church – we know that there are many different expressions of a Christian way of life. In fact, the rich diversity of the communion of saints honors those numerous ways men and women have lived the perfection of the Gospel.

Nevertheless, being identified as authentically Christian requires some essential elements so that those we meet have an encounter with Jesus Christ. First, the truth and love of the Lord should shine in us and through us. Our faith must be an active, living faith.





One may choose to be a member of the Catholic Church or not. No one is forced to belong to the Church. We never lose our baptismal dignity of being part of the family of Christ, but we are free to choose to participate or not participate in the life of our family. If one becomes a member of the Church, he or she is expected to believe what the Church believes and attempt to live it out as best he or she can, including participating in the Mass and other sacraments, providing a good example and witness to others, and helping others to know Christ.

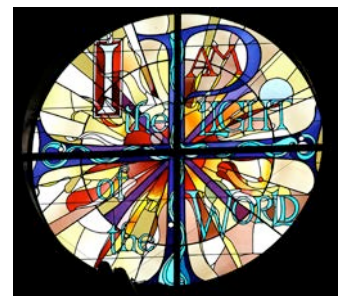
When we come to the institutions of the Church – its parishes, schools, universities, charitable organizations, health care facilities and more – these too must reflect a genuine Catholic identity with visible communion with the Church, both universal and local, and fidelity to Catholic teaching. As Pope Francis has implored, each of these institutions and those involved in their operation must be oriented toward the mission of the Church (*Evangelii gaudium*, 27). The purpose of these entities – and the task of those who work for them – is to lead people to Jesus.

During his visit to the United States in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI addressed Catholic educators at The Catholic University of America and spoke so encouragingly about the ministry of education. He said, “Education is integral to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News. First and foremost every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God, who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth (cf. *Spe salvi*, 4)”.



Furthermore, a particular responsibility is incumbent upon the bishop with regard to Catholic institutions and their Catholic identity (*Veritatis splendor*, 116). His is the responsibility to see that our Catholic institutions are places where the faith permeates the culture. Our schools, for example, at all levels, should provide the environment where revealed truth, reason and charity are engaged in an ongoing effort to shed greater light on the human condition. In whatever area of endeavor, the Catholic identity of the effort should be found, for example, in a mission statement. And the message it voices should exhibit a vision of life that is rooted in Christ, articulated in his Gospel and manifested in his Church. Catholic institutions should be distinguishable from secular ones. I often remind students, in our Catholic schools, that they should expect their school, since it is Catholic, to be different. The school should provide a moral climate where excellent education in a faith-based situation benefits each student. The lessons learned about faith and love in these institutions help graduates build a better world.

“Those who serve in Catholic ministries, those people served by them, and the community at large are all impoverished, not enriched, when the ministry’s Catholic identity is diluted or lukewarm.”





“The Church does not require others to believe or live by her teaching. But we do ask for and insist on the freedom to present and publically demonstrate our faith.”

Similarly, those who agree to assist the Church in her mission and ministries represent the public face of the Church. Whether Catholic or non-Catholic, they should respect our Catholic identity and avoid behavior that contradicts the very mission of the Catholic institution.

The wider community benefits from the presence of authentically Catholic institutions and faithful Catholic disciples because the richness of Catholic teaching can engage the secular culture in a way that the light of the wisdom of God is brought to

bear on the issues of the day. On the other hand, members of the Church, those who serve in Catholic ministries, those people served by them, and the community at large are all impoverished, not enriched, when the ministry’s Catholic identity is diluted or lukewarm.

In recent legislation in various parts of our nation, efforts are being made to force the Church to accept on our teaching faculties, staff and charitable services personnel those who live in a way that publically repudiates the teaching of the Church. The Church does not require others to believe or live by her teaching. But we do ask for and insist on the freedom to present and publically demonstrate our faith in our Catholic schools and faith based institutions. Those who participate in the ministry of our institutions also share in the obligation to help them achieve their goals and purpose. The respect for religious freedom that we ask for is enshrined in the Constitution. But we hope that our elected officials and those who seek to shape public opinion through the media can also see that such freedom is a matter of basic fairness.

Pope Francis writes eloquently of the act of assent that is required of those who want to belong to the Catholic Church or who seek to share in her mission and work. His words were addressed specifically to teachers but are applicable to all the areas of Church ministry. “We need to remember that all religious teaching ultimately has to be reflected in the teacher’s way of life, which awakens the assent of the heart by its nearness, love and witness” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 45).





## Chapter Five

### God's Mercy, Forgiveness and Our Fidelity



When asked by a journalist “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” Pope Francis responded, “I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner,” (*America* magazine, September 25, 2013.) The Pope’s words are not empty humility but the true posture required of any follower of Jesus Christ. We are sinners in need of a savior.

Jesus came to call sinners. So if we are ever to be saved, we must admit our sinfulness. To be truly redeemed, we must face our own failures. To be truly healed, we must allow the Lord to touch our wounds.

Our failure to live up to the demands of the Gospel is a reality of life, but

we are blessed with God’s mercy and forgiveness. The Lord’s capacity to forgive is infinitely greater than our ability to sin. However, failure to always fulfill our Christian obligations is not the same as the decision to reject specific obligations, teachings, commandments and requirements set by the Lord. It is inevitable – though no less deserving of our repentance – that we will sin. But our moral failings must not cloud our belief in the truth of Christ’s teachings. And believing in that truth, we must not fail to proclaim it.

Saint John Paul II said, “People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories. The witness of a Christian

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life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission” (*Redemptoris missio*, 42). Blessed Paul VI put it this way, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers it is because they are witnesses” (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 41). When people are faithful and give good witness, they lead people to Christ. But when we

give bad witness, we can lead people away from Christ.

When I was a young priest in the 1960s and 1970s, there was much experimentation and confusion in the Church. Teachers and clergy were encouraged by some to communicate an experience of God’s love, but to do it without reference to the Creed, the sacraments, or Church

tradition. It did not work very well. Catholics grew up with the impression that their heritage was little more than warm, vaguely positive feelings about God.

Those years of experimentation left many Catholics weak, spiritually and intellectually, and unable to withstand the tsunami of secularism that came in recent decades. We lost many people

because we failed to teach them about right and wrong, about the common good, about the nature of the human person. This left many no longer able to admit that we are sinners who need Jesus because many no longer know what sin is.

This lived experience of people not being fully or correctly presented the truth of the faith illustrates why we are called to the New Evangelization. It also demonstrates why it is so crucial that we reassert and strengthen our Catholic identity, and that our freedom to do so be respected in society and in law.

We have received something in the Church that is not ours; it is the Lord’s. As his faithful stewards, we are accountable to the Lord, not to the contrary demands of the culture. We need to remain connected to Christ and be true to the mission he has entrusted to us.

“Since faith is one, it must be professed in all its purity and integrity. Precisely because all the articles of faith are interconnected, to deny one of them, even of those that seem least important, is tantamount to distorting the whole” explains Pope Francis. “Indeed, inasmuch as the unity of faith is the unity of the Church, to subtract something from the faith is to subtract something from the veracity of communion” (*Lumen fidei*, 48).

Although we are sinners, we do not profess sin, but rather, trusting in God’s mercy, move from sin to truth and freedom so as to profess the Gospel of Jesus Christ.



“As his faithful stewards, we are accountable to the Lord, not to the contrary demands of the culture.”





## Chapter Six

### Our Identity and Our Freedom

Christianity offers an ancient and enduring understanding of freedom. That vision recognizes our unique human ability to choose, our need to distinguish between good and bad choices and the freedom to make choices, even bad ones.

In life we are profoundly conscious of the ability and need to make choices. This capacity is not something outside us, nor is it given to us by another person or the government. It is an expression of our very human nature and it is intrinsic to our human dignity. It is called freedom.

When we come specifically to the Body of Christ in the world, Saint John Paul II stressed that the Church is “obliged to do everything possible to carry out her mission in the world and to reach all peoples. And she has the right to do this, a right given her by God for the accomplishment of his plan” (*Redemptoris missio*, 39).

Human freedom – or as sometimes framed in contemporary discourse, “freedom of choice” – when fully and rightly understood, does not mean absolute autonomy to do whatever you want to do. We encounter limits to freedom, some of which are natural and proper, and some of which are wrong.

It is in truth, Jesus said, that we are set free (John 8:32). If we do not know or recognize what is true and what is false, then we cannot make an informed and



intelligent choice, that is, a free choice. “Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery” (*Fides et ratio*, 90). If we live a lie, we are not free. Thus, we are free not to do whatever we *want* to do, but what we *ought* to do, that is, to do what is true to who we are as God made us to be.

Freedom is not exercised in a vacuum. We coexist with others, and so freedom is necessarily a shared freedom. Invariably there will be conflicts of interest and belief.

One balance traditionally struck and

“We are free not to do whatever we *want* to do, but what we *ought* to do, that is, to do what is true to who we are as God made us to be.”



"In the Middle East, Nigeria, India and elsewhere, churches are being destroyed and Christians are murdered simply because they are Christian."

which has worked over the years includes voluntary association. For example, no one is forced to belong to any faith community, Jewish, Christian, Muslim or otherwise, and no one is forced to work in one or another faith-based institution. All are free to follow their own path. So too, we must be free to protect our Catholic mission and identity. This is a reasonable and long recognized way of living together that accommodates everyone in their choices and conscience. Disagreement simply cannot be denounced as discrimination. Some commentators see this situation as a uniquely American way to live both freedom and diversity. It rests upon the understanding that diversity is real and disagreement is not discrimination.

Such freedom cannot be negated by a newly created definition of discrimination.

Historically, people have faced many challenges to freely live their religious identity. In many parts of the world, Christians and people of other faith communities simply are not free. For example, in the Middle East, Nigeria, India and elsewhere, churches are being destroyed and Christians are murdered simply because they are Christian.

Closer to home, religious freedom is also violated by laws, policies and practices which seek to restrict us in the exercise of our Catholic ministries. Here in the United States, for example, priests, professors and others on







college campuses have already been threatened with disciplinary action for expressing Catholic teaching. Other forms of infringement of religious liberty include government or social demands that we act contrary to our faith.

The many challenges Catholics face demonstrate the need to be vigilant. We rejoice in the constitutional protection of our freedom, but we cannot take such safeguards for granted. We must speak out and clearly

say, when speaking to the world situation: No Christian should be forced to convert to another faith. Closer to home, no Christian should be forced to accept a secular view of life with its own vision of morality. No Catholic institution should be denied its freedom simply because it wishes to follow the Catholic faith.

“Their only words were: ‘Jesus, help me!’ They were killed simply for the fact that they were Christians. You, my brother, in your words referred to what is happening in the land of Jesus. The blood of our Christian brothers and sisters is a testimony which cries out to be heard. It makes no difference whether they be Catholics, Orthodox, Copts or Protestants. They are Christians! Their blood is one and the same. Their blood confesses Christ.”

Pope Francis, Feb. 16, 2015,  
following the beheading of 21  
Coptic Christians in Libya



CNS photo/Paul Haring

## Chapter Seven

### Challenges to our Catholic Identity



“Two generations of secularization have fashioned this time when some do not even know the foundational prayers, or understand the most basic of Catholic devotions.”

Sadly, it is not unusual to encounter Catholics who were raised in Catholic families, educated at institutions that identify themselves as “Catholic,” and who may attend Mass regularly, yet do not necessarily know or understand their faith or believe it. **Consequently, in the last decades some have chosen to leave their Catholic home; others have just sort of drifted away.** Some may say they are “spiritual,” but not “religious,” and therefore not affiliated with the Church.

What accounts for this demise or decline in faith? Why has this happened? Partly it is due to certain social, cultural and political trends, which have been identified by a succession of popes under the heading of secularism, materialism and

individualism. In an earlier pastoral letter in 2010, *Disciples of Our Lord: Sharing the Vision*, I tried to explain something about this phenomenon.

The contemporary culture has reached a point where it turns off what is not immediately accessible. Our society prefers to listen in sound bites, rather than in semesters. Slogans replace thoughtful explanations. The broad advances of globalization over a relatively short span of time have had significant effects on daily life. The Church has experienced a considerable decline in the numbers of priests and religious. The significance of neighborhood and local relationships seem less important to a highly mobile society.

Entire generations have become





disassociated from the support systems that facilitated the transmission of faith. Tragically, the sins of a few have encouraged a distrust in some of the structure of the Church itself.

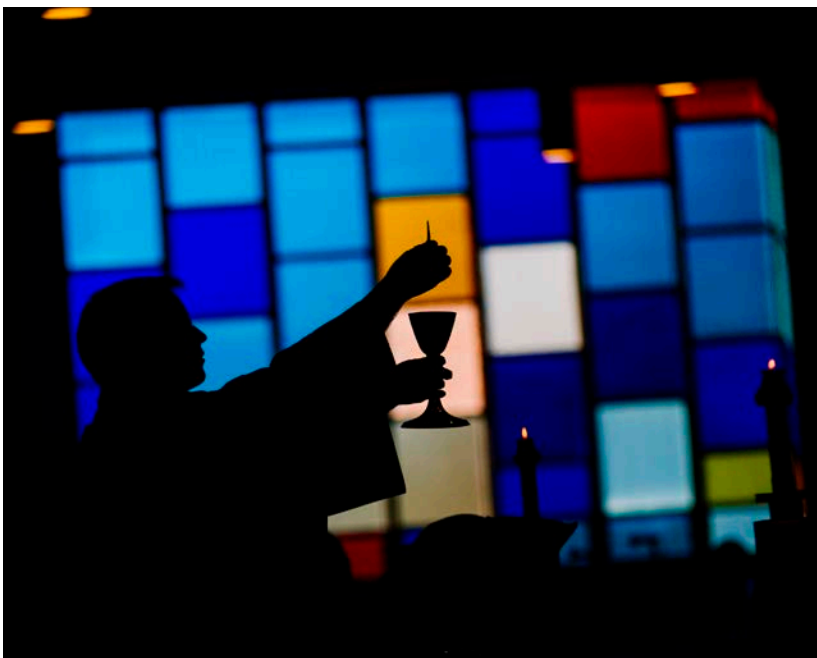
Two generations of secularization have fashioned this time when some do not even know the foundational prayers, or understand the most basic of Catholic devotions. Still others do not sense a value in Mass attendance, fail to avail themselves of the Sacrament of Penance, and have often lost a sense of mystery.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his visit to our archdiocese in April 2008, underlined these three challenges of secularism, materialism, and individualism. He went on to say, “While it is true that this country is marked by a genuine religious spirit, the subtle influence of secularism can nevertheless color the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior . . . Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted.”

The Pope diagnosed the struggles which we face. The full transmission of the faith to recent generations has encountered rocks, weeds, and a soil at once hard and dry. The illusion that lurks behind many of the contemporary trends and tendencies has disrupted authentic religious experience.

Consumerism suggests that our worth is found in the things we accumulate (*Caritas in veritate*, 22, 34; *Evangelium vitae*, 23). Individualism demands that we rely on no one but ourselves and our personal needs always take first place. Skepticism pressures us to trust only what we can observe and measure, and purports to destroy the classical and time-tested relationship between faith and reason and threatens to reject the basic right to religious liberty and freedom of conscience (*Caritas in veritate*, 42; *Evangelium vitae*, 23).

The attempt to recast human sexuality as casual and entirely recreational has led to an untold weakening of and



“Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted.”

Pope Benedict XVI,  
Washington, DC,  
April 2008

continued assault on marriage and family life. Autonomy convinces us that fidelity to faith only restricts us. The popular absorption with constant activity leads us to believe that unless we are always busy and hectic we are behind schedule. In this setting it becomes commonplace to treat the human person as an object to be used and to focus almost exclusively on material gain. The swift decline in standards of entertainment has exposed our youngest children to repeated displays of intense violence.

In this context, Saint Pope John Paul II referred to a “crisis of civilization” (*Evangelium vitae*, 11) and raised the question as to whether religious indifference, de-Christianization and atheism were not found in their most widespread form in secularism (*Christifideles laici*, 4, 34).

These contemporary views of life discussed here often seek to bleach out recognition of God and marginalize the Church and limit her freedom and ability to function and live out her Gospel mandate. Added to this are the challenges of direct government interference as well as in some parts

of the world, social violence and persecution.

One new effort to abridge religious freedom is the legislation that would require Catholic schools to retain teachers who by their words or actions publicly contradict the teaching of the Church. Some now wrongly claim it is discrimination for the Church to insist that those who teach in Catholic schools present Catholic teaching in word and in witness.

As Catholics, who we are cannot be separated from how we live. Jesus taught us to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and care for the sick and those in need, and the Catholic Church’s history of educating and serving the poor is long and well-known. However, there is a false notion that the beliefs of Catholics can be separated from how we live. Ministries such as Catholic Charities, Victory Housing, and our high schools are not independent of the Church. They are as much a part of the Church as our parishes.

In according with religious freedom guaranteed by the First Amendment, Catholic organizations should be free to operate by the tenets of the Catholic faith, should not be forced to accept the government’s moral views, and should not be required to provide a platform for persons who oppose in both word and action the mission of the Church.

Other factors undermining our Catholic mission and identity come from within, either through explicit dissent, miscatechesis or personal conduct that tends to draw people away from the communion of the Church.

“Some now wrongly claim it is discrimination for the Church to insist that those who teach in Catholic schools present Catholic teaching in word and in witness.”







## Chapter Eight

### Discrimination: A Word that Needs to be Defined



Jesus taught throughout his ministry the equality of all people – men and women, rich and poor, elite and outcast. In an age when the prevailing society treated some people like property, the first Christians saw slaves and nobles as brothers and sisters in Christ. Prejudice and discrimination are wrong because they divide the human family, violate fundamental human dignity and are contrary to the truth and charity to which we are all called (*Gaudium et spes*, 29).

The Church has always supported and encouraged the role of civil society in upholding the dignity of the human person. We encouraged civil rights laws to promote equality and unity in society. More and more, however, measures passed in the guise of

“anti-discrimination” are being used divisively to favor one group over another and deny equality to others. Suddenly terms like “discrimination,” “freedom of choice” and “human rights” have been distorted and turned upside-down to restrict religious freedom.

In this climate of upside-down definitions, the Church and its identification with Christ in the task of bringing us to God is often at best misunderstood and other times maligned. With belief in God sidelined, the recognition of an objective truth and common moral order is no longer held by many. We are increasingly told that what we hold is irrational and to disagree with the new culture is “discrimination.”

“Christian belief is grounded in an authentic humanism of truth in love which sees every human being as possessing inherent dignity and invaluable worth. It is neither discrimination nor an undue imposition on the freedom of others to promote that belief and live by it.”

In December 2014 the District of Columbia passed two pieces of legislation that directly challenge the ability of Catholic institutions to live out their Catholic identity. The first act called the Reproductive Health Non-Discrimination Amendment Act (RHNDAA) would force religious institutions, faith based organizations and pro-life advocacy organizations to hire and retain individuals whose public speech and conduct defy the mission of their employer. Some writers have described this legislation by way of analogy. It is as if one political party would be forced to hire an advocate of another political party to avoid the charge of discrimination. The second law called the Human Rights Amendment Act (HRAA) repeals the 1989 amendment to the District of Columbia Code that protected religiously affiliated schools from having to endorse, fund or provide other assistance for the promotion of sexual conduct contrary to their faith and moral beliefs. Some writers have referred to this as the imposition of a state enforced sexual morality on Catholic institutions. This too is done in the name of “anti-discrimination.”

“Our ministries, programs and schools turn no one away because of his or her gender, race, religion, ethnic background or social condition.”



It has become increasingly acceptable – in the media, academia, and even the courts – to disparage as bigoted and mean-spirited anyone who seeks to uphold fundamental truths about the human person that have been recognized throughout history. In a time when for many the supreme civic virtue is “tolerance,” the Catholic faith is considered intolerable. In a time when prejudice has been all but outlawed, anti-Catholicism gets a pass. It is, as more than one scholar has observed, the one remaining acceptable prejudice.

An aggressive secularism and relativism assert a new morality. Those views that do not follow the new “moral” order are effectively “outlawed.” Anyone who challenges the new order as false is branded as “intolerant” and pressured to remain silent.

Claims of discrimination should not be allowed to become the new weapon for diminishing religious freedom and outlawing institutional Catholic identity (*Evangelii gaudium*, 55).

Christian belief is grounded in an authentic humanism of truth in love which sees every human being as possessing inherent dignity and invaluable worth. It is neither discrimination nor an undue imposition on the freedom of others to promote that belief and live by it. As Saint John Paul II explained, “The Church’s firmness in defending the universal and unchanging moral norms is not demeaning at all. Its only purpose is to serve man’s true freedom” (*Veritatis splendor*, 96).





In fact, for two millennia, the Catholic Church in her teaching and works has been a perennial defender of human rights, advocating for equality and the good of all people. Our ministries, programs and schools turn no one away because of his or her gender, race, religion, ethnic background or social condition.

However, there is a difference between one's identity, which we are called to respect, and one's actions, which we can very well find offensive even immoral. There are some things that the Church simply will not do, and it is not discriminatory to say, "We do not do that."

We can embrace someone who has had an abortion. But we cannot proclaim that the killing of a child in the womb is good. For someone to insist that we do so under the guise of avoiding "discrimination" is unjust.

We must remain true to who we are. We cannot be expected to embrace error and give up our identity which inspired us to form ministries of teaching, healing and charity in the first place.

For those in the Church, as well as those who agree to assist in her ministries, everyone is held to the same standard. We all are at the service of the mission of Christ, and no one can claim a right simultaneously to work for the Church and to work against her belief.

Thankfully, we are blessed to have a Pope who has been able to express the sentiments and teachings of the Church when he says that, far from condemning those who struggle with those teachings, the Church embraces you with loving arms, desiring to walk with you and seeking only what is good for you in Christ.

"It has become increasingly acceptable – in the media, academia, and even the courts – to disparage as bigoted and mean-spirited anyone who seeks to uphold fundamental truths about the human person that have been recognized throughout history."



## Chapter Nine

### Freedom to be Who We Are and Do What We Do



“Respect for freedom of choice should not require that we set aside our own faith convictions and freedom in order to satisfy every demand of those who have other beliefs.”

Catholic teaching presents a beautiful vision for life even as we struggle to live it – even as we struggle fully to understand it.

More than once someone has remarked to me, “The Church needs to get with the times.” A variety of books have been written arguing that Christianity – and the Catholic Church in particular – must change.

Yet Jesus did not change his message just because some who heard it felt it was a “hard saying” (John 6:60). No one should be surprised that the Church continues to be faithful to Jesus’ Gospel – his teaching. After all, it is his message, his Church. We are not free to change either.

Others in our pluralistic society may and do have a view on certain matters – particularly moral concerns – which differ from Catholic teaching. The Church does not require others to believe her teaching. “The Church proposes; she imposes nothing. She respects individuals and cultures, and she honors the sanctuary of conscience” (*Redemptoris missio*, 39). We simply ask for the freedom to live by that teaching ourselves.

While people may disagree with us and choose to follow their own moral path, respect for freedom of choice should not require that we set aside our own faith convictions and freedom in order to satisfy every demand of those who have other beliefs. Freedom





of choice for one cannot mean that others have no freedom and no choice. In particular, it is not the role of the government to substitute its own judgment and dictate which view of morality is permissible and which is not.

The Church has the right to recognition and protection of her true Catholic identity. To be clear on this point, among other things, as set out in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, the Church is entitled to be respected in her:

- freedom of expression, teaching and evangelization;
- freedom of public worship;
- freedom to express her moral judgment on human reality whenever it may be required to defend the fundamental rights of the person or for the salvation of souls;
- freedom of organization and of her own internal government;
- freedom of selecting, educating, naming and transferring her ministers;
- freedom for constructing religious buildings;
- freedom to acquire and possess sufficient goods for her activity; and
- freedom to form associations not only for religious purposes but also for educational, cultural, health care and charitable purposes (426).

By invoking religious liberty, we do not ask for special treatment or privileges. The use of the term “exemption” is thus misleading. We merely recognize the proper role and limit of government (*Deus caritas est*, 28).

The year 2015 marks the 800th anniversary of the *Magna Carta*. The first article of that historic document guarantees that the rights and liberties of the Church shall be held inviolable by the state. As recognized in the *Magna Carta* and in the First Amendment to our own Constitution, religious liberty means that there is a limitation on the power of government in the first place, that it is not within the province or rightful authority for the state to intrude upon matters of faith generally and the Church specifically. The two spheres are distinct. This contributes to the deepest good of humanity because it is this freedom which has historically enabled religious believers to make their particular contribution to the common good.

“The Church has the right to recognition and protection of her true Catholic identity.”



## Chapter Ten

### Our Contribution to the Wider Community



“If we are looking for a public witness to the benefit of our Catholic identity today, all we have to do is look around our community.”

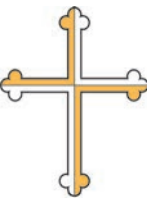
“**W**hat does the Church bring to society?” Even when people seem to pose this question as a challenge, deep down there is usually a note of hope in it. Somewhere they heard the promise of Good News and they long for it to be true.

The Church brings what it has always brought: an invitation to faith, an encounter with Christ, and a way of living inspired by the Gospel. We are called to share this Good News with others and let them know of the beauty of life in Christ. There is no greater, more perfect gift that we can give to others.

Ever since the first Catholic settlers set foot in what is now Maryland in 1634, the Church in this area has made a significant impact, manifesting Christ’s kingdom of truth and life, justice, love and peace. If we are looking for a public witness to the benefit of our Catholic identity today, all we have to do is look around our community.

Every day in the Church of Washington, lives are changed through our Catholic education, social service and health care programs as we seek to teach, to serve and to heal as Jesus did. All our works reflect Jesus’ call to be his disciples by sharing his love and hope





with others. We serve others regardless of their religion or circumstances not because they are Catholic, but because we are Catholic.

Throughout the history of what is now the Archdiocese of Washington, Catholic lay people, religious and priests have generously supported the work of education, social service and health care.

Our Catholic schools in the Washington area began when our country did. For generations, Catholic schools in the archdiocese have educated leaders for our Church, our communities and our nation.

The newly formed Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington helped people during the Depression, and now in a new millennium, Catholic Charities is the largest private social services provider in the Washington area, bringing help and hope to 120,000 people annually in more than 65 programs at 48 locations.

Over the decades, the Archdiocese of Washington's ever-present concern for society's most neglected members has created a vast social service network – one that respects the dignity of each person, walks with them and strives to provide a lasting solution to their needs.

Many of the contributions made by our family of faith are highlighted in the booklet published last year, *Catholic Impact 2014*, which supplements an earlier 2012 edition. Here is told in words and pictures a story of faith, hope, love, goodness, compassion,



outreach, caring, service, truth, justice and peace.

Today the Archdiocese of Washington includes some 620,000 Catholics who worship in 139 parishes and nine missions in Washington, D.C., and the five surrounding Maryland counties of Saint Mary's, Charles, Calvert, Prince George's and Montgomery. Each weekend, Masses are celebrated in more than 20 languages.

Our Catholic family of faith includes people from many different lands, backgrounds and ages who speak many different languages. But they all share one faith, and the call to be the face of Jesus to others, sharing his Good News in today's world.

Through our Catholic educational, social service and health care programs, the goodness of God, the power of the Holy Spirit and the presence of Christ is actually visible and tangible in our community. As cultural forces and government actions sometimes make it more difficult for us to carry out our work, we must remain true to our Catholic identity.

“Through our Catholic educational, social service and health care programs, the goodness of God, the power of the Holy Spirit and the presence of Christ is actually visible and tangible in our community.”

# Conclusion

CONCLUSION



“As we open ourselves to life in the Spirit, radiating fully Christ’s truth and love, we can also bring joy to a world that so desperately needs God.”

As Americans, we are not required to carry around identity papers or wear special insignia on our clothing marking us as Christian. Nevertheless, each day the world does ask us, “Are you Christian?” We must answer truthfully and then act accordingly. If we are Christian, then Christ should be recognizable in us, and we should not be made to mask him or appear to be something else.

Reflections on *Catholic Identity in an Age of Challenge* would not be complete, however, without some reference, even brief, to the recent experience as well of the emergence of a youthful generation whose faith is refreshingly vibrant. I encounter these young adults at diocesan activities, parishes, college campuses, young professional events and elsewhere. These young adults, women and men, provide hope for the future. One encouraging aspect of their participation in such events is their comfort level with being Catholic and being identified as Catholic. Their desire is to know more about the faith in order more fully to live it. Challenge can bring out the best in all of us. Perhaps this is what we are now seeing.

The call to be authentically Catholic is traced all the way back to the Acts of the Apostles where Jesus, in his final instruction before his ascension into heaven, tells them, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you, and you will

be my witnesses...” (Acts 1:8). After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it was precisely as witnesses to all that Jesus said and did that others began to tell the story. Peter proclaimed, “God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses” (Acts 2:32).

Pope Francis puts it this way, “We should avoid the temptation of having earthly power transform our faith.” In a recent homily he prayed that “the witness of the martyrs” might help us lest we be tempted by the ways of the world towards an attitude that is not of Jesus. Shortly after his election Pope Francis called us to experience the value of witnessing in our societies an openness to transcendence that is inherent in the human heart.

Our Catholic identity, even when challenged, should remain for us a source of conviction and pride. As God was with those who first accepted the challenge, “You will be my witnesses,” so God is with us as we accept the summons to be faithful witnesses to our Catholic faith today in all that we say and do. As we open ourselves to life in the Spirit, radiating fully Christ’s truth and love, we can also bring joy to a world that so desperately needs God. By being true to our Catholic identity, we can help manifest and realize God’s kingdom, coming to be here and now, a kingdom of truth, peace, joy and love that truly sets us free.

Faithfully in Christ,



Archbishop of Washington

**Pentecost Sunday**  
**May 24, 2015**





## Second Vatican Council Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*

**2. The human person has a right to religious freedom.** This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits. . . . The right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. . . . However, men cannot discharge these obligations [to truth] in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom. . . .

**4. The freedom or immunity from coercion** in matters religious which is the endowment of persons as individuals is also to be recognized as their right when they act in community. . . . Religious communities rightfully claim freedom in order that they may govern themselves according to their own norms, honor the Supreme Being in public worship, assist their members in the practice of the religious life, strengthen them by instruction, and promote institutions in which they may join together for the purpose of ordering their own lives in accordance with their religious principles. Religious communities also have the right not to be hindered, either

by legal measures or by administrative action on the part of government, in the selection, training, appointment, and transferral of their own ministers . . . Religious communities also have the right not to be hindered in their public teaching and witness to their faith . . .

In addition, it comes within the meaning of religious freedom that religious communities should not be prohibited from freely undertaking to show the special value of their doctrine in what concerns the organization of society and the inspiration of the whole of human activity. Finally, the social nature of man and the very nature of religion afford the foundation of the right of men freely to hold meetings and to establish educational, cultural, charitable and social organizations, under the impulse of their own religious sense. . . .

**6. The protection and promotion of the inviolable rights of man** ranks among the essential duties of government. Therefore government is to assume the safeguard of the religious freedom of all its citizens . . . . Finally, government is to see to it that equality of citizens before the law, which is itself an element of the common good, is never violated, whether openly or covertly, for religious reasons. Nor is there to be discrimination among citizens. . . .



**“Our Catholic identity, even when challenged, should remain for us a source of conviction and pride. As God was with those who first accepted the challenge, “You will be my witnesses,” so God is with us as we accept the summons to be faithful witnesses to our Catholic faith today in all that we say and do.”**

- Donald Cardinal Wuerl

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