

2021 Men of Christ Address by Archbishop Jerome E. Listecki

It is a pleasure to address the Men of Christ. I have participated in the various Men of Christ gatherings since I became Archbishop of Milwaukee some 11 years ago. The Men of Christ have been a powerful force in the formation of a male's responsibility, challenged by one's faith, to be beacons of light in their communities, parishes, and families. As Archbishop, I have been proud of the accomplishments in the efforts of the Men of Christ and their national outreach.

In today's environment, the Men of Christ are needed more than ever. Our religious liberty is being challenged, our voices are muffled, and our moral teachings are discredited. We must hold firm to our beliefs for they are the source of our strength and the pathway to our salvation.

I do not place my trust in ideological promises of utopia or socialistic promises of cultural equality. I am not naïve; no human source will bring me happiness apart from the love of God. I place my trust in God and I trust in His Word. "For God so love the world that He sent His only Son so that all who believe in Him might not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

We cannot underestimate our situation. We must understand the nature of the attacks on our freedoms and like our predecessors, we must be willing to accept the challenges to confront the forces that would have us surrender or compromise our beliefs.

There is a simple formula, and I know resonates with any man: God, family, and country. When I was appointed a pastor of St. Ignatius Parish in Chicago, I assumed the responsibility for pastoring a beautiful parish that was, at one time, very influential on the northside of Chicago. The parish proudly possessed huge stained-glass windows, 44 feet high

and 18 feet wide. They adorned both the north and south side of the Church, a Church that held 1,100 people.

One stained-glass window, in this over 100-year-old Church founded by the Jesuits, was a depiction of the glory of heaven. The Blessed Mother, “Regina Caeli”, Queen of Heaven, is holding her Son, and a symbol of the Eucharist (the Host) is fixed over the throne. To the left and right of her is St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis Xavier (St. Ignatius founded the Jesuit Order and St. Francis Xavier was the great evangelist of Asia); in the middle of the stained-glass is a great number of the Jesuit Saints – I like to joke that every Jesuit thinks they are a saint. In the lower portion of the stained glass window are a soldier and a sailor. The window was dedicated to those who fought and died in World War I.

When I became a bishop, a few soldiers from my military units would drop by for a visit and ask for a tour of my beautiful church. They knew of my personal patriotism, so they were horrified to view the stained-glass window and see the soldier holding the flag that was touching the ground. Military people never allow the flag to touch the ground because it is a sign of disrespect. Men and women die under that flag, protecting the country they love and the freedoms it represents. They looked to me for an explanation. I asked them to see where these military people were. They quickly answered, “in heaven.” I quickly responded, “All in creation bows before God in heaven. He is the ultimate source of our allegiance.” God is the ultimate source of who we are and everything we do.

One of the problems that we will discover as we address the issues that confront us is the loss of objective truth. Somehow in our questioning of everything, we have embraced the sense that there is no objective truth. Think of what that means: there is no right or wrong. Everything becomes a matter of personal choice and that personal choice

means conforming objectivity to whatever fits our likes or dislikes or our wants and desires.

When I stated that the formula is simple, it is GOD, FAMILY, and COUNTRY. However, the application is always complex. Let us examine *country*. I love our country. I believe that our Founding Fathers gave us a great gift. Many who know me know that I have a personal affection for George Washington. A work called *Scalia Speaks* is about the former Justice of the Supreme Court, who is a practicing Catholic. His son and former law clerk put together a series of his reflections on various topics. They were all short addresses. Much to my welcomed surprise, there was a statement that Justice Scalia considered Washington the greatest of the Founding Fathers. In an address given at the Union League Club of Chicago on Washington's Birthday, Scalia states:

Washington is my favorite of the Founders – the one I would most like to meet. Not just because he was the indispensable man – the man without whom the Revolution would not have succeeded, but also because he is a puzzlement. He was not a great intellect; indeed, he was quite sensitive about his lack of formal education. He was not even, to tell the truth, that skilled a military tactician, as the New York campaign demonstrated. And he was surrounded by great intellects, who produced great writings---Hamilton. Madison, and Jefferson, to name the most prominent. Yet all those well-published intellectual geniuses looked up to, deferred to, stood in awe of George Washington. What was there about the man of honor, of constancy or steady determination? A man who could be believed, trusted, counted on. A man who would step down as a president after two terms, though he could have been re-elected for life because that is what he believed a democratic republic required. (Has any national leader with the exception of

Cincinnatus so willingly stepped down?) He was as I have said, the indispensable man.”

Men of Christ, you must be the indispensable men of this generation. I believe that your love for God, family, and country will lead us through these difficult moments in our history. The Founding Fathers were not perfect, but they did envision a society that should reflect the natural liberties endowed by our creator. They gave us a system of laws that help define our commitment to the ideals of the people that formed our nation. As I said, they were not perfect, but men and women publicly stood tall so that we as a people might progress and seek those goals which our founders articulated when they said to form a more perfect union.

I know that we are in a period where criticism of our history is fashionable even popular. But I continue to maintain that even with its foibles our system of government is still the best in the world. I also believe that some of the decisions recently handed down by the Supreme Court simply violated the freedoms which our founding fathers sought to protect. I never hide from the fact that I am pro-life. I intellectually and morally hold that life begins at conception and continues to natural death. The Roe v. Wade decision goes against the very foundation of our society in protecting the unborn that is the future of the society which is formed to protect and defend the citizens of this nation.

Could anything be more obvious than the truth that this unborn is “life,” and that this life needs to be protected if, for anything else, as the future citizens of our society? I share this belief with you, that we will not get back on track as a society until we recognize the “right to life” and the protection of that life.

I was made a Bishop by Pope John Paul II, who is now St. John Paul II. No one demonstrated a more pro-life position and articulated the reasons why than St. John Paul II. He talked of the culture of life versus the culture of death. This was from a man who battled the Nazis and

Communists and warned us in the West, who are prone to the dangers of rampant individualism, which is embedded in our materialistic culture.

Sometimes it is easier to battle an enemy that is obvious than one that subtly engages a spirit of self-interest. When we think of only ourselves, we do damage to our neighbors and violate the command of Jesus to love one another.

Religious Freedom is the first freedom protected in the Bill of Rights. I believe that our Founding Fathers recognized that a society is only as free as the ability to proclaim an allegiance that transcends a governmental obligation. The founders may not have all been theists those that believe in a personal God, but I would argue that they were Deists which meant they recognize a creator that endowed us with rights before the government assured those rights in a social contract.

Religious liberty offers us an opportunity to celebrate our God who gave us the freedoms we profess and who calls us to a responsibility to defend and protect those freedoms. As a bishop, it is my responsibility to lead. Therefore, I need the freedom to teach without government interference or imposition of thought. It is through this freedom that I can form our faithful in their responsibility to the gospel and the teachings of the Church. I and the faithful will be held accountable before God for our testimony and witness to the truth. So, we need to be formed in the truth of the Church's teachings, pro-life, human sexuality, the nature of marriage between a man and woman. The other freedoms speech press and assembly all support and follow religious freedom and needed for the dignity of human persons.

I come from a family that instilled in me the importance of togetherness and the willingness to contribute to the common good of the family members. This understanding was extended to the family of our country and community. The male role model for the family was my father, he served our country in World War II as a Marine, knowing he

was doing so to protect his family and the way of life enjoyed by the citizens of the United States.

I had an epiphany as a boy I remember it clearly. It was winter. I was in eighth grade and was kept home by my mother because of a touch of the flu. I was in the kitchen and looking out the window viewed my father returning home from work coming in through the back gate. He was a Chicago Transit Bus Driver. He was carrying his bag, the snow was falling, and it struck me suddenly like never before that this man got up every day went to work at 3:30 or 4:00 a.m., five days a week, so that my mother, sister, and I could have food on the table and a roof over our heads. I always loved my father, but rarely did I stop and appreciate the sacrifices that he made on my behalf. He set the tone for my sense of fatherhood in the priesthood and that sacrifices must be made for the individuals I loved.

In what I believe was a stroke of pastoral genius by Pope Francis, he dedicated this year to St. Joseph, the Universal Patron of the Catholic Church. During this time of the world-wide pandemic, with anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion, we turn to St. Joseph. In his pastoral letter *Patris Corde* (With the Father's Heart), Pope Francis states that "...our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people. People are often overlooked. People who do not appear in the newspaper and magazine headlines, or on the latest television show yet in these very days, they are surely shaping the decisive events of our history..." Saint Joseph reminds us that those who appear hidden or in the shadows can play an incomparable role in the history of salvation. Joseph was a hidden figure who merely followed the will of God and did so with a father's manly characteristics. Let us review some of those characteristics the pope refers to in his Apostolic Letter.

Joseph was a "beloved father" whose acts were sacrificially placed in service to the mystery of the incarnation and its redemptive purpose. Joseph was a "tender and loving father". In Joseph, Jesus saw the tender

love of God who can work through us despite our frailties and weaknesses because God always sees the bigger picture.

Joseph was an “obedient father.” He followed God’s direction to protect Mary and Jesus from those who sought to destroy them. Joseph was an “accepting father.” He trusted the spiritual path that Joseph traces for us does not explain but accepts. This is not resignation which means it is just hopeless this is what I refer to as “Divine Resignation” and many of the Saints possessed this “Divine resignation.” I cannot explain it, but I trust that it is in God’s Divine Plan, so I accept that God is using me as His instrument. John Paul’s mantra was “Do not be afraid.” I may be fearful, but I go forward with confidence in God.

Joseph was “creatively courageous.” If at times God seems not to help us, surely this does not mean that we have been abandoned but instead are being trusted to plan, to be creative, and to find solutions ourselves. Joseph is a “working father.” Working persons, whatever their job may be, are cooperating with God Himself. And, in so many ways, they become creators of the world around us.

My classmate, Fr. Anthony Brankin, created a ten-foot-high by six feet wide bas relief for the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse. It is dedicated to the patron of the diocese, Joseph the Workman. The bas relief depicts St. Joseph working with the young Jesus who is before him holding two pieces of wood and, amazingly, they are crossed. Behind the right shoulder of Joseph is Mary, whose hand is up to her mouth in a gesture of shock. This was a fulfillment of the work. The wood of the cross would the way of salvation.

Joseph is a father in the shadows. Pope Francis states that fathers are not born but made. “A man does not become a father simply by bringing a child into the world, but by taking up the responsibility to care for that child. Whenever a man accepts responsibility for the life of another, in some way he becomes a father to that person. Children today need a father.” You, men of Christ, are called to fulfill the role of St.

Joseph and form and fashion our young with the powerful examples that you bring to them with your lives.

There is a Latin phrase “*Nemo dat non quod habet*,” which means: I cannot give you what I do not have. Therefore, we must use the instruments necessary to form us into the men that support God, family, and country.

First and foremost, practice your faith through Mass, Reconciliation, and daily prayer. Understanding the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross is to understand the great love the Father has for us. The Mass not only celebrates that sacrifice, but it also presents to us Jesus himself as food for the journey. As a boy, I took great strength when my father attended Sunday Mass with us. It was an affirmation of my faith and I took pride in being a member of this family.

Confession is the sacrament that offers us an opportunity to examine our lives. It is not a sin bin for us to confess our mortal sins but helps us to know that we can be better and the areas that need support. A father who confesses is a man who loves God and wishes to improve his relationship with God and the ones he loves. It also is a means of grace which is a God’s strength that comes through the sacrament.

In daily prayer, we must be in contact with Jesus, Mary, and the saints. We can share our concerns in prayer knowing that God is listening, and we are open to hearing His call to follow Him. We need to be supported by other men who also seek to follow Christ and His Church. Organizations like Men of Christ confirm that we are not alone in our thinking. We are inspired by our brothers and we can accomplish so much more together than we ever can by ourselves.

Modern apologists are individuals who publicly defend the faith and encourage evangelization, which is the promotion of the faith in this modern society. Books by Matthew Kelly, Patrick Madrid and, of

course, the “Word on Fire” apostolate with Bishop Robert Baron are just a few suggestions. If you have the opportunity, Relevant Radio presents programs that are enjoyable and informative. Try Father Simon Says with Father Richard Simon. He opens the Scriptures with a unique perspective. I know you cannot do it all, but try some and add it to your daily diet, and I assure you, it will offer you peace.

Make sure family is on your list. The natural family is attacked today. Again, in this year of St. Joseph, there is an emphasis on family. As fathers, assume the leadership role in prayer at meals or a family rosary. I assure you that your children will be watching. Teach the younger children the value of prayer and the older children the necessity for witnessing to others this will demonstrate your confidence in God.

Good works are an important way to put prayer into action. As a family choose a charity and make it your own. It is a way to give back the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, burying the dead. Contributions are important but the example of donating time makes a statement that you are concerned for others in the name of Christ. If you cannot think of charity, ask your parish pastor there are all sorts of task that need to be performed for the parish to function.

Take a family trip to a shrine we have three in Wisconsin: Our Lady of Good Help in Champion, Holy Hill in Hubertus, and Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse. There are even beautiful church sites and mini-shrines within this Archdiocese or other dioceses.

We all worry about our society, and we should. Be active members of the community, exercise your leadership but be supportive of those leaders and potential candidates who reflect those cherished positions of freedom and the teachings of the Church. If we remain silent, then we fail to appreciate the efforts of so many who have sacrificed before us. What has been given to us is a gift of this country must use the gift

wisely and not allow our freedoms to be abused or diminished. We still have the power to vote and together to express our voice.

At times, we can be discouraged, so we must realize that “It is God’s time and not our time.” We should have confidence. “I trust in God and I trust in His Word.” The saints did not demand that God must do this for them. Rather, they merely understood they must be for God and He will use them for his glory. Father Joe Walijewski from La Crosse, whose cause for sanctity is being promoted, had a saying: “I am but a pencil in the hand of God.” Men of Christ, let God write His story through you.

I need you to place yourselves at the disposal of God’s plan. Through being Men of Christ, you will give glory to God, give witness to your families, and challenge our society. Do not be afraid. Remember the war has been won. Jesus’ sacrificial love has saved us and has given us eternal life. We are fighting the battles. And I lock arms with you in the battle for God, family, and country.

Lastly, allow me to thank Kevin O’Brien and his work with the alliance taking the cause nationally. Tom O’Brien, the Executive Director of the Men of Christ, Joe Dentice, and Pat Masterson, and their leadership with the dynamic men’s group, Jim Michaletz for video and marketing and to all the men's group leaders and parish captains. I know that I express the sentiments of many of our priests in expressing our blessings and support for you and all your efforts to live the faith and spread the Gospel. God bless you.