

STS General Chapter 2023

Pastoral Address – Senior Patrick Rooney

II Timothy 2:1-5, 8-13

It was the latter part of the 1960's – some of you here are mature enough to remember those days; for others that period counts as ancient history and some of you were perhaps not even born! I was still in my Catholic Order at that point and to say that those were crazy days would be nothing less than an English understatement. The Second Vatican Council had just closed, and in the Church, we were all grappling with the actions it had taken. There was a great sense of uncertainty, of questioning everything, of a disconnectedness which the sociologist Durkheim called anomie, that rootlessness in a body which connected it through shared norms or values. And to add to that there were protests in the streets about so many things including against the wars in Vietnam and elsewhere. There were challenges to all our institutions, and we were all warned not to trust anyone over the age of 30...which now seems almost quaint. Indeed, there was so much disruption that I recall the cover of one Catholic magazine at the time simply proclaiming that, "We shall celebrate with such great dancing, the death of your institutions."

The result of all this was that many of us were shaken, unsure of who we were and what it meant for our lives as religious under vows, let alone the work we were called to do in the world around us. Everything seemed to be in question, and while we were all seeking to be relevant, we had no real idea what that actually meant.

And then came the day when a metaphorical lightning bolt seemed to bring all our confusion and uncertainty into a new focus, a statement which reflected who we truly were and what we were about. It was an article in a respected Catholic Journal that many of us in our house read and was titled "A Credo for Mankind" I along with others memorized it and can recite some of it even today after all these years. It began with these words "I believe in man and in a world in which it is good to live for all mankind and that it is our task to create such a world." For those of us immersed in our studies at the scholasticate, here it was - the clear answer to our questioning, our searching, our uncertainty, because we now saw quite clearly that **It was about us!** It was about what we could, indeed should do. With our new insight we saw that God could be put aside for He was not the creator; rather it was we humans who would make and remake the world in which we lived; it was we who could save mankind; for in the end it was all about we and us and above all, ME. Indeed, perhaps Thomas Altizer was right when he advocated in 1966 that "God was Dead." O what fools we were!

Now it's true that the phrasing in this creed for mankind lacks the eloquence, the marvelous imagery and the inclusivity which are to be found in the dulcet tones of the pastor reciting the words of that more modern offering affectionately known as the Sparkle Creed. But then we have come a long way from the 60's language, if not from the heresies we love to embrace. O what fools we still are!!

The problem, my sisters and brothers, is that much of the same malaise which afflicted us in the 60's has been magnified and multiplied in our world today. We are faced with much of the same sense of rootlessness, alienation and even despair as our nations and our world question everything more and more. Our shared norms and values are now truly up for grabs and our institutions, including and perhaps especially the Church, are denigrated and even despised. And our ME centered culture now holds such a firm grasp on us, that any sense of shared duty or responsibility is now viewed as being strange if not ridiculous.

So perhaps it is appropriate both for this retreat and its theme centered on the Creeds, that the Episcopal lectionary for today provided this wonderful text from Second Timothy. Paul writes from prison to Timothy urging him to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus and to stand firm using that wonderful imagery of a soldier, an image he uses elsewhere in other letters. Now I am fully aware that this militant imagery is not in vogue in some of our churches. Indeed the whole understanding that the Church exists in two forms – militant and triumphant – is viewed as outmoded or at least not appropriate to our modern age, with the result that many of our more militant sounding hymns were removed from ELW and other modern hymnals lest they offend the sensibilities of those who only want Jesus as that nice man who said nice things and who would never even think of upsetting us with images of strength and firmness like a soldier standing in the gap as the foe advances.

But there is a purpose for this call to be strong and stand firm and it speaks, in part, to who we are as a Society and the theme of the Creeds which will serve as our point of study over the next couple of days. Paul first calls on Timothy to remember - a word or action used regularly throughout Scripture, from the call to God to remember His covenant; to the prophets who remember God's promises - even in the midst of exile; to Jesus Himself who calls us to do this in remembrance of me. This remembering is that living reality which is so much more than a recollection but rather that which forms and shapes both our identity and our community, a remembering which in turn leads to how we live our lives in the present. To remember then is not to recall what I have done but what God has done for me in Christ Jesus – which is to raise Him from the dead. That He is raised from the dead is the central truth of the Gospel. Christ has broken the bonds of death and is alive and because He lives, we live also. And while you are remembering that reality, says Paul, remember also that this Jesus is descended from David, thereby fulfilling the Messianic prophecy of an everlasting kingdom which He rules now in power and great glory. So, what then is the Gospel? It is NOT the Credo for Mankind with its emphasis on me? It is NOT the Sparkle Creed with its abominations and heresies oozing out of every miserable textual pore. Rather it is this firm creedal declaration, this objective reality in our lives and in our Church – that Jesus is Risen and He and He alone is Lord.

And in the midst of a world and a Church riven by dissonance, division and despair, we should not despair for Paul, even though chained in his own irons, proclaims that this Gospel of

resurrection and Lordship cannot be constrained. Indeed Timothy, the apostles, the teachers and preachers in our own generation, we the members of this Society - all are channels of God's Word. For Paul, even his suffering is for the sake of God's people that they too might inherit eternal glory. And if that understanding keeps Paul going it should keep Timothy and each of us going as well.

For the essential truths are sure or, as one commentator put it, they are trustworthy. These five truths recited by Paul were probably in common use throughout the Christian church at the time and serve as an exhortation to Timothy to endure in the ministry to which he has been called. And like Timothy we can trust that through our identification with Christ's death and resurrection there is also a death to sin and judgement and the enlivening to life eternal. And it is trustworthy that our reign with Christ in eternity is preceded by the learning experience of discipleship. And it is trustworthy that the danger we face in the Christian way is denial of Jesus. For if we abandon our faith in Jesus, if we disown Him as both the Credo for Mankind and the Sparkle creed do so easily, then we are lost.

My sisters and brothers, these words to Timothy give us good reason to endure in the Christian life and in the sacred call we have been given as pastors in Christ's One, Holy Church and our call to proclaim the Gospel message. For the center of the Gospel, despite what I and my brother religious believed back in the 60's, is not Me but rather Jesus. He is our living Lord and in Him we live also. For as the trustworthy saying puts it "if we have died with Him we shall also live with Him." There is nothing surer than that. Yes, troubles can and will weigh us down at times; for the world and even the Church can seem to be a mess and our denominational structures seem to be shaking, if not downright teetering at times. But these are momentary troubles, and they are achieving for us an eternal glory which far outweighs them all.

And in an age of uncertainty and confusion, remember always the power of God's Word. Recently I got a call to officiate at a young lady's wedding next summer. It so happens that I baptized her some 27 years ago and then taught her the early truths of our faith along with some of her young compatriots. Now I had to wonder at times whether the training I provided in Sunday school and catechism was really working, whether she and the others were learning. Indeed, at times I had to ask - was it worth it? But I should not have doubted or questioned since there is indeed power in God's Word. For what was obvious, after just a few minutes of conversation, was that this young woman was still firm in her faith and her commitment to the Christian life. The power of God's Word had indeed prevailed. And so, with the approval of her current pastor, I will gladly officiate and join her and her spouse to be, in a faithful Christian marriage.

We may not see anything happening when we teach or even preach; indeed at times we may be totally frustrated in this ministry to which we are called. But God's Word is not chained and its power is undiminished even in the face of denominational confusion, uncertainty and even errant creeds, no matter how sparkly they may be!

Today, as we gather to begin this General Chapter retreat, Paul, through his words addressed to Timothy, once again issues his call to us for perseverance, an endurance, even in the face of all our difficulties. In our world, in our culture and in our churches, there is still uncertainty, a lack of clarity, a blurring of the ethical and moral standards that we believe are critical. And today, just as we did in that ancient age of the 60's, we will face the danger of having our faith undermined by false teaching. In our world and in our culture, there will always be an emphasis on works-righteousness, on doing rather than receiving as that old Credo for Mankind sought to do.

But in his words to Timothy today, Paul has laid before us these trustworthy sayings, these objective realities of our faith and they are centered not on me but on Christ. And over the next two days, we will hear further objective realities in our faith as Drs. Hinlicky, Schiffrin and DeGaal speak to us of the creeds – not the ones based on me nor the sparkly ones but rather the true creeds, the conciliar creeds, the Apostolic creeds, the creeds of Holy Mother Church. It is these creeds which we pledged to teach and preach before hands were laid on our heads. It is these creeds that will remain unchanging even in the midst of a changing world. And it is these creeds that call us to an endurance in our ministries, a faithfulness of teaching and preaching that cannot be matched with the errant thoughts and propositions of the Credo for Mankind nor the Sparkle creed nor any other false teaching that has arisen over the centuries. What I did not understand or grasp in those long ago days of the 60's was that it is not about me but rather about the call to endurance which Paul issues to Timothy and now to us.

So, my sisters and brothers – remember! As we worship over the next few days together, remember. Remember that Christ is Risen from the dead and that He reigns as Lord of all. And be firm in the faith, the faith of the Church, the faith in which we were baptized. Heed the call of Paul to Timothy to endure in the faith even in the midst of the madness and confusion that surrounds us in our churches and in our world and the errancy of false creeds that will always abound. But then do not fail to trust, for the saying is trustworthy that if we have died with Him, we will also live with Him and that, my sisters and brothers, that is a promise you can trust.