Living the Truth in Love

Chrism Mass Homily

*A Tale of Two Cities*

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." So begins Charles Dickens famous novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, a story set in France and England both of which were to face political revolutions. This work involves an intricate plot that centers on resurrection. At the conclusion of the novel, its protagonist, Sydney Carton, goes to the guillotine in the place of another. He figuratively reenacts the expiatory death of Christ on the Cross. In a particular way, Carton represents the sacrificial nature of priesthood.

This Chrism Mass, so intimately associated with Holy Thursday, holds a special significance for our priests. We are all pleased that so many of them are gathered here this morning at St. Ignatius Cathedral and we are grateful for their ministry each day. At the very beginning I wish to express my personal gratitude to my brother priests for their support and their daily sacrifice of themselves to bring the love of Christ to us. This is a most appropriate time for all of us to express our gratitude to them.
Our society is facing a critical financial crisis and all of us are affected by it. It is becoming more and more difficult for families to make ends meet and for administrators, including pastors, to manage the budgets for which they are responsible, having to make difficult decisions which affect essential services to others. Our nation is also facing another crisis. While we are hopeful for more services to assist the poor and those in need, the basic right to life of the unborn child is at its greatest risk. Unfortunately, the financial crisis, and not basic moral values, is the highest priority. Our own Diocese has just faced a painful situation regarding two of its priests. Public attention has been focused on their unfortunate faults to the embarrassment of the rest of our responsible, faithful and hard-working priests. In many ways these can be considered the worst of times.

However, without being overly simplistic, it is precisely difficult times that make for the best of times, and this is especially true for the priest. There is only one priesthood and that is the Priesthood of Jesus Christ in which we all share by our baptism. However, the ordained priest shares in a unique manner in that priesthood through a sacramental configuration to Christ. By His Cross, the Lord accepted suffering and pain in a sacrificial and expiatory manner. It is His willingness to offer Himself for all that makes Him the High Priest. The Cross is the ultimate manifestation of God’s love who “made Him who did not know sin to be sin, so that in Him we might become the holiness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). God makes the worst of times into the best of times.

As priests, when we stand at the altar and offer Christ's sacrifice, we are offering ourselves as He did. Indeed, the celebration of the Eucharist reflects our priestly disposition in
all matters. The offering of ourselves for others is why we wanted to become priests. On the day of our ordination we were asked, "Are you resolved . . . . to unite yourself more closely every day to Christ, the High Priest, who offered Himself for us to the Father as a perfect sacrifice?" We enthusiastically promised yes. On that day the bread and wine to be offered were handed to us with the words, "Accept from the holy people of God the gifts to be offered to Him. Know what you are doing and imitate the ministry you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord's Cross." If there are added burdens for the priest today, they truly can be used in a sacrificial manner. No one, not even a priest, should look for burdens. But when they come, even unfairly, and as a priest we accept them as did Christ, then we experience the true nature of priesthood.

Another monumental work that refers to two cities is St. Augustine's the *City of God*. It is not a tale of two countries but that of two realms, the secular, the city of man, and the sacred, the City of God. At the present time, these two cities are fused. St. Augustine realizes that a revolution results from the tension of these enmeshed cities, "the earthly by the love of self even to the contempt of God; and the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self." This revolution leads to true freedom and it is the revolution of the Cross. In a certain way the freedom that resulted from the revolutions in England and France about which Charles Dickens wrote in *A Tale of Two Cities* is but a mere reflection of the true freedom which results from the revolution of love about which St. Augustine wrote in the *City of God*.

St. Augustine's *City of God*, a political work, has much to say to our society today. His understanding is that the city of man is based on a false system of values which cherishes material things as ends in themselves and not as a means to a relationship with God. The city of
man frustrates itself in its desire for freedom and happiness. Only the City of God, united in love, is able to possess true freedom even when material possessions crumble. St. Augustine's premise was well articulated by our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, shortly after the inception of the financial crisis when he referred to the false realism of our age. He stated that we see in the collapse of the great banks and financial institutions that the values which society considers so important are realities of a second order. The one who builds his life on these material objects, on success and everything that is visible, builds on sand. He stated that we must change our concept of reality and build upon a foundation which permanently remains and that is the Word of Jesus Christ. This will never collapse (cf Mt 7:24-27).

The task of building the city of man into the City of God, by building on rock rather than sand, is especially entrusted to the priest. He must clarify true reality and point to absolute values in a passing city. He must live the primacy of the love of the Cross which frees the spirit. It is the prophetic role of the priest to proclaim the dignity of life at every stage in a city which has lost this respect in place of a greater respect for material progress. The priest truly transforms the entire cosmos through the power of the Eucharist which reaches to the core of creation and makes present Christ's sacrificial love. It is the Mass that makes the worst of times into the best of times as it places the Cross before us. In this sacred action, the resurrection bursts forth by which the City of God becomes manifest and true reality is made manifest.

If there are challenges facing priesthood today, these challenges only sharpen the priesthood's focus. We do not choose the times in which we live, but we do choose the way in which we live in those times. When we were ordained, we were willing to accept any burden out of love for Christ. If the times bring us difficulties, they also bring us the opportunity to be
better priests. We should not be ashamed to be like the One who lovingly took the sins of the world upon Himself to bring the world true freedom. Priesthood makes a difference not only in the city of man but in the eternal City of God. "You are a priest forever." That is how radical our configuration is to the person of Christ.

I am greatly encouraged by the fact that we have recently accepted two candidates for the seminary. I am even more encouraged that nine more are being considered for acceptance next year.

I believe that young people are looking to build the City of God and young men are hearing the call of Christ to live the true freedom of that City. The worst of times certainly may be making for the best of times.

At the end of Charles Dickens novel, Carton willingly sacrifices his life in the French Revolution in place of another. His famous words at the guillotine, "It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done," are truly the words of the priest. When we stand at the altar and even when we face misunderstanding, it is truly a far better thing that we do.

In a few minutes we will be asked, "Are you resolved to unite yourselves more closely to Christ and to try to become more like Him by joyfully sacrificing your own pleasure and ambition to bring His peace and love to your brothers and sisters?" These words are ones which ask us if we are willing to build the city of man into the City of God and they imply an acceptance of the best of times and the worst of times. Recalling our ordination promises and joyfully responding yes to them is a far better thing we can ever do.
Most Reverend Gerald M. Barbarito

April 10, 2009