

Friday of the 17th Week in Ordinary Time, Cycle II
July 30, 2010

Fr. Joe Bambenek

Traveler's Mass; Defending the Faith Conference, Franciscan University of Steubenville

Jeremiah 26:1-9

Psalm 69

Matthew 13:54-58

“The Truth will Set you Free.” We, along with thousands of other pilgrims this summer, have come to Steubenville seeking ever greater freedom in our lives and in the lives of those we love. The search for freedom seems to be a fundamental yearning of the human heart. Yet often human beings reject true freedom, and freedom's heralds. Although Jeremiah and Jesus were sent as heralds of God's freedom, they and their messages were rejected in today's scripture readings. And it was not just in these limited stories that they faced rejection, during their lives and ministries, both Jesus and Jeremiah would suffer greatly at the hands of those did not want to renew their own minds and hearts. Why is that? Well, true freedom is not free, it comes with a price. The cost is the cross. True freedom requires that our minds and our hearts be renewed, that they be transformed in keeping with the will of God for our lives. But that process of transformation is hard; it is so much easier in the short run to be conformed to our age, even if the consequences in the longer term are grave.

For us in 2010, it does not take much imagination to see that a similar rejection of true freedom, in favor of a false freedom which enslaves, is prevalent in our society. I could easily preach multiple homilies regarding how our country, which prides itself on freedom, is actually falling more and more deeply into the various bondages of the Culture of Death. And I could preach on the challenges that we face as wood-be heralds in a society that is becoming increasingly intolerant to the truth.

Yet our pilgrimage here this weekend is not about abstract notions nor about academic social critique. In some ways, handwringing about how bad things are going in society, how enchained others are, can be too safe and comfortable. Furthermore, few of us will be in positions of sufficient cultural influence that we can turn the tide against the Culture of Death on our own. For the vast majority of us, being a herald of true freedom will resemble the ministry of Mother Teresa. She simply picked up and gave Christ's love to all whom she encountered, most especially the dying poorest of the poor. Mother Teresa's work, which in the eyes of the world seems menial, repulsive, and even pointless, has borne tremendous fruit for one very important reason: she lived out her vocation, the purpose for which God lovingly created her. She did not decide, “I could have more influence if I tried to convert the rich of Calcutta, rather than the poor, or those who will be living longer, rather than those about to die.” She faithfully responded to what God asked her to do, and lived out her vocation freely, in faith, hope and love. If we wish to be effective defenders of the faith, if we want Jesus to work miracles in our midst and through us, if we want to be heralds of freedom, our own minds and hearts must become ever more conformed to the specific will of God for our specific lives, the vocation for which He created us in love. To do this, we must be set free by the truth. Yet to freely embrace our vocation in freedom requires the hard work of transformation. This kind of transformation is the work of this weekend.

Some of you have been here at Franciscan for weekend conferences before; for others, this is your first Steubenville weekend. I remember back when I was here the first time in 1992,

how intimidating it was when people told me that they had been here 5 or 10 times before. Little did I suspect that someday I would be up here, at the start of my 14th or 15th conference. To those who are new, there is no reason to be intimidated, and all the reason in the world to be joyful. One reason that these conferences are so special, with such transformative power, is that attention is paid to nurturing all 3 theological virtues... if we but open our ears, minds and hearts. Through the many talks by excellent speakers, over the next two days we will be fed with truth that can catalyze growth in faith. Truths will be spoken about God and truths will be spoken about our ourselves that will encourage us, that can catalyze growth in Christian hope. And while intellectually rich, the conference is not solely an intellectual endeavor; we do all this in a spiritually rich environment, which is open to the overflowing, superabundant love of our Triune God. Today, and each day, we will have the fire of the virtue of love stoked in us as we worship & give thanks to God in Mass. There will be opportunities for freedom from sin through the sacrament of penance. In a few minutes we will have the opportunity to receive the greatest love of all, Jesus in the Eucharist. Tomorrow evening we will spend time adoring Him. In short, during this weekend, freeing truth is undergirded by love.

So what is it from which we need to be freed? What blocks us from virtuously living out our unique vocations? I propose that there are at least five weapons that the Devil uses to prevent us from being the freedom warriors for God who we were made to be. They are, generally in the order of how they need to be conquered: strongholds of sin, ignorance, fear, discouragement and distraction.

The Devil did not want me to be a priest and so threw many obstacles along my path... The Devil also does not want each one of you to embrace in freedom the vocation for which God made you. Just as each of our vocations are unique, so too are the combination of the obstacles that the Devil throws into our paths. However, to give a sample of the kind of freedom that we can experience during a Franciscan weekend conference, if we open ourselves to the renewal of our hearts and minds, let me share several of my own Steubenville freeing moments.

Perhaps the most significant freedom moment occurred when my eyes were opened to an area of idolatry in my life. During a Men's conference I came to see that a mental preoccupation, which was not intrinsically sinful, had become an idol in my life. It was an idol that demanded the sacrifice of much of my time and emotional energy. It was an idol that had to be smashed and removed from my heart for me to be able to offer my whole life in sacrificial love to God & His people in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. It calls to mind the story of the encounter between Elijah and the 500 false prophets; and of how the 500 resorted to stabbing themselves, to pouring out their blood, seeking to please Baal, yet to no avail. How fitting that image is of what our lives our like, and the damage we inflict upon ourselves, when we live for an idol.

Through the conferences I also experience freedom from the lies the devil had fed me for years about the dignity, or lack thereof, of being a priest. At one conference Fr. Benedict Groshcel told the story of Fr. Eugene Hamilton. Eugene was a seminarian who was given a special dispensation to be ordained a priest on his deathbed as he succumbed to cancer. Hearing of Eugene's heroic desire to be a priest, even though it turned out to be just for a couple hours on this side of eternity, freed me to see that the priesthood is, in fact, a desirable vocation, one of great dignity, not one about which to be embarrassed.

The Defending the Faith conferences, in particular, brought me freedom from a general ignorance about the things of God. Even though I went to daily Mass, hearing the excellent

talks, buying conference tapes, and yes they were still tapes back then, and listening to them over and over again fed my mind and soul in a deeper and exciting way than I had previously experienced.

Coming here also gave me greater freedom in the area of overcoming fear and trusting God. By praying in the Portinucula Chapel and walking the hillside stations of the cross during the moments of open time on the conference schedule I gained insight on God's love and care for me and came to trust Him more deeply.

And finally, freedom from discouragement was overcome when Fr. Michael Scanlan would invite those who might be feeling a call to the priesthood or religious life to come forward for a blessing at the end of his Masses. Several times he even invited us to write to him, share our story, and in exchange he would send a copy of his discernment books *What Does God Want?* or *Let the Fire Fall*. This helped me to see the truth about myself more deeply and to begin to have more courage following where God was leading me.

Each one of us has a different set of things from which we need freedom. These are just examples of how God can work in our lives here this weekend. It is my hope and prayer that all present will, in some way or another, come to a deeper level of freedom during the next two days, so that we all can more fully live out the universal call to holiness, and become the saints who God created each one of us to be.

And lest we be tricked by the Devil into thinking that we must be completely free before we can bear fruit in the lives of others, let me share one last story. One of the best ordination gifts I received was a Facebook message that literally came out of the blue 4 weeks before my ordination. It came from a man named Tim Nolt. I immediately recognized who he was, for just a few weeks earlier, I came across Tim's name when I was going through an old address book as I worked on ordination invitations and wondered what had become of him. Tim had been my roommate during the 1998 Men's conference. We did not know each other before that weekend, and until May 1, I had not heard from him since. After confirming that I was, in fact, the Joe Bambenek who had been his roommate years ago, he wrote back to say that he now was in the seminary. He wanted to thank me, because in the course of a late night roommate conversation 12 years ago, I had been the first person to suggest that perhaps he might have a calling to the priesthood. He described it as a seed planting moment. And while it took a decade for that seed to grow, he told me that he always shares the story in talks he gives about his vocation because it was a significant milestone in his thinking. Sometimes planting a seed to freedom is all we can do. We want our words to bear immediate fruit, but often our example or words plant seeds which take years to grow. Nevertheless, encouragement, spoken and acted in truth and love, can help set other people free.

As we begin this conference weekend by receiving love Himself in the Eucharist, let us open our minds and hearts ever more deeply to His love, and to His words of encouragement. Let us believe Him when He says to each one of us in a unique way "The truth will set you free!" And let us embrace the opportunities for freedom this weekend offers so that when we leave here on Sunday afternoon, each one of us will be better equipped to boldly proclaim to all who God places in our lives, and especially to those in bondage, "the truth will set you free!"