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Address to Lay Men and Women of the Archdiocese of Baltimore

I. INTRODUCTION

Archbishop Lori,
Father Rector,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is an honor for me to address you after the beautiful celebration earlier today marking the close of the 200th anniversary year of the Basilica of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I was asked to speak on a number of topics from my book *God or Nothing*. I will structure my talk with a brief anecdote contained in my book.

When I was in the seminary, we seminarians were required to have what were called the “3 H’s”: holiness, head knowledge, and health. Unfortunately, I did not have any of them. But by the grace of God, I have made it all the way to where I stand before you today. My health especially almost caused my expulsion from seminary. Thankfully, my Father Superior had me tested by specialists, and, after treatment, I was able to recover my strength and catch up on my studies in subsequent years.

I would like to speak to you today about the three H’s. I shall not speak about physical health. But I will address a certain aspect of spiritual health: our fidelity and our enthusiasm in our vocations as disciples of Jesus Christ. By addressing these topics – our formation, or “head knowledge,” our pursuit of holiness, and the health of our vocations – I hope to encourage you in the specific vocation that the Lord has called you to and through which we imitate Him as His disciples.

II. HEAD KNOWLEDGE OR FORMATION

I will begin with “head knowledge,” with our formation, and I will treat it briefly because, although important, it is certainly the least important of the three. A sound knowledge of Church teaching prepares us to live well our faith and to witness it to others. More fundamentally, it prepares us to encounter Him. Knowledge of doctrine, knowledge of God’s Word attunes our minds and our hearts to His voice, to His will, to His guidance in our lives. Formation prepares us to follow Him.

Among the simplest and most profound insights that we glean from our formation is that life in Christ is possible. Somehow, all of what the Church teaches makes sense. Individually, we do not have to explain it all. But good formation introduces us to the logic of God – that is, to the *Logos* – who illuminates all things. A life in Christ, friendship with Christ is possible. Holiness is possible. We can never take for granted these simple truths – theological truths. Even if they are expressed abstractly, or even if we fail to appreciate them in their depth, subtly they open our eyes to the possibility of God’s intervention in history and in our individual lives.

Consider for a moment: many people in the West no longer believe that holiness is possible. They have become jaded, or they have mistaken holiness for an inaccessible moral ideal. Holiness is nothing other than living exactly as God wants us to live, by being conformed more and more to His Son. This is the perfection that Christ commands: to be perfect, as our Heavenly Father is perfect (*Matthew 5,48*). Two millennia ago, the Apostles followed Christ. They left everything, and their lives were never again the same. The path taken by the Apostles is still a call made to you and to me today. Our Catholic tradition presents numerous examples of how God makes perfection accessible to us in this life in the lives of the saints and in their writings.

For example, St. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes three degrees of perfection: (1) the perfection of God, who fully knows and loves what is true and good; (2) the perfection of the angels and saints, who know and love what is true and good according to their full capacities; (3) and earthly perfection – a life of virtue, in which our capacities are purified and prepared for life in Heaven (*ST II-II.184.2*). We attain this earthly perfection when we have overcome every habit of sin that we discern within our hearts, when we have formed our hearts according to God’s Law and delight in it.

Some of us may find talk about theological truths and doctrines difficult, but knowledge like this edifies. It dispels the confusions and relativism, so prevalent in our times and even voiced by some eminent Church leaders, that can discourage us. To dispel the darkness, a solid grounding in Church teaching through the three sources of Catholic teaching – Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium – prepares us to live an authentic Christian life. It makes possible a life of holiness.

III. OUR PURSUIT OF HOLINESS

More important than our theological formation is our pursuit of holiness. On this topic, I would like to propose four points for consideration.

First, God offers to us through the Church many tools to aid us in our pursuit of holiness: traditions of prayer, penance and fasting, disciplined life in community, His Word in Scripture, and His grace in the sacraments.

St. Paul tells us: “Pray constantly” (*1 Thessalonians 5:16*). The most important moments in life are the hours of prayer and adoration. They give birth to a human

being, fashion our true identity; they root our existence in mystery. My daily encounters with the Lord, in supplication and prayer, are the basis of my life.

The same is true of fasting – through suffering, friendship is deepened; through penance and fasting, our hearts are disciplined and freed from distraction for friendship with Him. Through daily meditation upon Scripture, we allow God to shape our minds and we learn to recognize His voice.

These practices are nurtured in the community of the Church. In community life, we need to surround ourselves with brothers and sisters, and good mentors, who reinforce our daily rhythms of prayer, penance, and meditation upon the Word of God and who encourage us in the pursuit of holiness. Furthermore, we receive the sacraments in community, and in the sacraments, we encounter Christ most powerfully. In the Eucharist, we are present first and foremost to God. There we find the source and summit of our lives, our prayer, and the prayer of the whole Church. Through these means, and especially through the Eucharist, we allow Christ to shape us. In a special way, which we will discuss in greater detail shortly, in the worthy celebration of Holy Mass, we are configured unto Christ, “the Holy One of God.”

Second, our pursuit of holiness requires us to quiet our hearts. At the start of our pursuit of holiness, our interior lives are often troubled and opaque to us. Prayer, fasting, the discipline of community life, meditation on the Word of God, and participation in the sacraments help us to bring order to our hearts. These practices teach how we ought to act, to feel, and to perceive, how we fall short of such perfection, and how to grow toward it.

In time, we discern the contours of our hearts – we learn to recognize temptations more quickly; we uncover and correct subtle habits toward evil and deceptions that

we accepted in years past. Over the course of years, each systemic tendency toward evil can be overcome with the help of God's grace.

Thus, we grow in integrity – the wholeness that God cultivates in us. Then, our hearts – which at the start were like a troubled abyss – appear to us as a tranquil sea of glass.

Third, the quieting of the heart makes way for something even more precious than quietude – this is silence. Silence is not simply the lack of noise. Silence is a positive thing – it is quiet *chosen*. It is a word in the soul, a participation in the Word of God. In silence, we discover the most intimate prayer, the holy and eternal Presence of God within our hearts.

This encounter transforms us. Silence becomes our place of refuge – the place in which we offer to the Lord our every experience, every detail of our day. We see our lives with Him. We discern together with Him, His work in the world. We keep watch over our hearts together with Him – all in silence.

In this silence, we come to know the unique manner in which God speaks. We hear the sonorous thread of silence that runs through all liturgy. We find that the Word of God in the silence of our hearts comes from God and is addressed to God. It is the inarticulate groaning of the Holy Spirit who prays to the Father on our behalf (*Romans* 8:26). To hear this Word is to enjoy the very life of the Blessed Trinity within our hearts. This is holiness. This silence of God's Word is the pearl of great price.

There is no better place to encounter God in silence than in Eucharistic Adoration. There, we begin to resume the posture of right relationship with our Creator. Adoration is evidence of our desire for an astonishing intimacy with God. A few

quiet moments in contemplation of this reality overwhelms. We lower ourselves that He might raise us. There, we remain on our knees, literally crushed by the immense love that God has for us. Here we encounter “*the power of silence.*”

Finally, holiness leads us to suffer with the Lord. In suffering, our hearts are purified, our worldly attachments surrendered, our attention turned toward Christ’s most eloquent revelation of divine love – His Death upon the Cross. In the silence of our hearts, we discover that through suffering, we are most conformed to Him, and in the same silence, God draws us to desire that we should so suffer.

Allow me to dedicate a moment here to the unique call of priests that can help us all. The priest is not only an *alter Christus*, another Christ, but he is especially *ipse Christus*, that is, Christ Himself. The priest pronounces the same words as Jesus when he says “this is my Body, this is my Blood.” He is configured and identified with Christ. He is the physical presence and the immersion of the Mystery of Christ on the earth. Perpetuating Christ then, is not compatible with the reality of a marital life. One cannot claim to identify oneself with Christ and at the same time claim to dissociate celibacy from the priesthood. To do so would be to construct a priesthood according to our human thinking, but without perpetuating the priesthood of Christ, obedient, poor and chaste. The priest will always be a sign of contradiction – no different to Christ Himself.

This is especially important for you and I to recognize and embrace. In every Mass, the priest imitates Christ, who on the night on which He established the Priesthood and the Eucharist for us, had before His mind the Passion and Death that He would soon endure. Christ – our High Priest – became for us *Altar, priest* and *victim*, the holy and unblemished lamb sacrificed in expiation of our sins. Priests are called to do

likewise, to keep in mind His Passion and to yearn to give of ourselves like Christ on the Cross.

This is not to claim that priests alone suffer for Jesus. Nothing can be further from the truth! To whatever state of life God calls us to – married or celibate for the sake of God’s Kingdom – all of us seek holiness so that we might become fitting offerings to God, so that we might participate more fully in the Holy Mass and in the sacrifice of Christ. In a manner appropriate to those in whom God cultivates His holiness, we *seek* to suffer with our Lord, for then we are fully conformed unto Him. And then our suffering is as nothing.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux writes, “The faithful soldier does not feel his wounds when he lovingly contemplates the wounds of his King.” In Christ’s suffering, we find our refuge, our comfort, our strength. At the foot of the Cross, in the silence of our hearts, all is still. There we rest in the perfect victory of God.

IV. HEALTH OF VOCATION

To love suffering in union with Christ is the height of our Christian life: “*Take, eat. This is my Body, broken for you. Take, drink. This is my Blood, spilled out for you*” (Matthew 26: 26-28). Then, we are wholly configured unto Him. It is the perfection of our vocation, whether we are married, priests, religious or celibate for the sake of God’s Kingdom. But whether we have achieved this height, or perhaps achieved it for a time in the past, the challenge remains to sustain it, or to recover it if we have wavered.

To renew our vocation, married or celibate, we ought to return frequently to how we discovered it. This can also help those of you, sitting here today, discerning where God's will lies for you today. When we attempt to discern what God is calling us to do, we explore in our minds and hearts the various possible commitments that we might make, projects that we might undertake, lives that we might live.

We ask ourselves, in which of these possibilities do I foresee for myself the greatest happiness and closeness to God?

What God wills for us becomes most clear when, in considering one of the possible paths and having overcome the temptations and deceptions that obscure our vision of it, we respond, I desire this – how could I do otherwise? “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your Word” (*Luke* 1:38). We hear the same response in the words of St. Peter: “Lord, to whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (*John* 6:68). St. Peter was transformed by his encounter with Christ – relative to whom he had become through God's gift of faith, discipleship became for him a practical necessity. This was his vocation.

This sense of desire, and not only desire but of necessity – this sense that this and this alone is the path that God has placed before me – lifts us up. It encourages us. It protects us from dejection and indecision and doubt.

To know that, by God's grace, we have fallen in love with His call to serve Him in one particular way and that we have been made to cling to this path disposes us to zeal. To make firm and jealously to hold to the grace we have received is zeal.

Our zeal reveals our vocation. As priests, it confirmed our vocation in the eyes of our bishops, and our directors and teachers in seminary; as religious, before our

superiors; as husband or wife, it confirmed our self-giving love for the other and in our children. Today, it continues to serve when we become weary. Our affective attachment and dedication to our calling aids us in keeping watch over our hearts and encourages us to suffer with Christ. Thus, zeal contributes to both the discernment of vocation and its fulfillment.

When our zeal, our habitual attachment to our vocation wavers, this calls for renewed discernment. Toward this end, I want to put before you two common traps that threaten to obscure our vocations, undermine our zeal, and leave us dry.

First, as I indicated earlier, we must recognize that vocation requires formation, and that this formation is ongoing. Our habits, our desires, our expectations will not remain the same as when we entered seminary or religious life or married life. This change in us is part of God's plan. If we do not appreciate this fact, we are exposed to certain temptations.

On the one hand, we might be tempted to view our interior lives in the past with scorn, and to believe that we embraced our calling "for the wrong reasons." We may be tempted to doubt whether we ever had the vocation that we now have in the first place. This is wrong because it fails to acknowledge that God comes to us where we are and that He leads us step by step, forming us anew for each stage of the journey. Saint John Henry Newman asked the "kindly light" to lead him one step at a time: "I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me."

On the other hand, we might be tempted to cling to the expectations that we had in the past, and to view the subsequent years of our lives with disappointment. Before such disappointment and shaken by suffering, again, we may be tempted to doubt our vocation. This, too, is wrong for the same reasons: God leads us step by step,

beginning from where we were and leading us into ever deeper friendship with Him. A quote of Pope Benedict XVI, in speaking of the Apostle Peter, always strikes me to the core: “The school of faith is not a triumphal march but a journey marked daily by suffering and love, trials and faithfulness” (General Audience, 24 May 2006).

We need to believe this: our life of faith most often walks in the night. Yet the more faith has to confront trials, the stronger it becomes. Nights of faith always end with finding the kindly little light of God. This is the nature of true friendship with God, which is the motor and purpose of every vocation – if we remember this, we will remain attuned to His call and not fall into thinking of ourselves as mere puppets in His hand or functionaries or bureaucrats or anything but His friends. Rather, we will touch God’s extraordinary mercy and fidelity towards us. His goodwill toward us is boundless!

The second trap concerns a misunderstanding of freedom. I suggested above that our vocations become for us practical necessities. In truth, these are relative necessities – they stand in relation to the persons who we have become. When God reveals to us a way of life and calls us to that life through a promise of joy, He invites us to pursue it freely and to be transformed in its pursuit. Thus, underlying the commitment, the challenges, and the suffering of our vocation is our free choice to pursue it, made possible by God’s grace.

We must remember this – that God has invited us to give of ourselves in freedom. If we forget this truth, our vocations quickly appear burdensome – and many temptations follow upon this deception. But if we remember this truth, then we remember also the beauty of our choice; we thank God for His still small voice by which He drew us into a particular way of imitating Him; we recognize that through

us, God calls all the world to the freedom found in friendship with Him. For without friendship with God, there is no real freedom. Mindful of our freedom in the Lord, we will not tire, and our zeal will not slacken.

These are just two common traps that we can fallen into, that sow doubt in our mind and undermine our zeal and wear us down. But by frequently returning to the practice of discernment, of revisiting the momentous call of God that has so dramatically shaped our lives, we will be refreshed and sustained. These are practices that keep our calling healthy. Such maintenance of our zeal is necessary in order to persevere in our desire to suffer with our Lord.

V. CONCLUSION

Each of the points that I have made I offer to you to encourage you in your calling, so that you may persevere in God's will for you. I started by speaking of the three H's: head knowledge, holiness, and health – or, in other words, our formation as Christian disciples, our pursuit of holiness, and the maintenance of the health of our vocations. In conclusion, I now wish to break down each of these into some more concrete points:

Draw upon the formation that you have received and continues to be offered to you, so that you may never doubt the possibility of holiness and of life in Christ, and so that you may remain always familiar with the logic – the Logos – of God.

Never neglect to make use of the wonderful tools given to us by the Church: prayer, contemplation, Adoration and fasting, discipline and communal life,

Scripture, and most importantly the sacraments. These are necessary supports and channels of grace.

Attend to your hearts, quieting the passions and uprooting every disordered habit that becomes perceivable in the light of faith.

Embrace silence, which is our most intimate encounter with God in our hearts, our pearl of great price.

Suffer with Christ. At every Mass and in silent Adoration, anticipate His Passion as He did. Yearn to suffer with Him and so to reveal most eloquently the love of God.

Finally, revisit frequently the intervention of God in your lives calling you to holy matrimony, to priesthood, the religious or celibate life. Do not allow yourselves to be distracted by scorn or disappointment. Do not forget the freedom to which He called you to dedicate your life to Him. Never fail to reappropriate this freedom, by which we are constantly refreshed.

I hope that these words may serve as encouragement for you. I am honored by this opportunity to address you, dear friends, and I am deeply humbled. We are in the month of May and in a Basilica dedicated to the Blessed Mother's glorious Assumption. How often we will have gone to Our Lady to tell her things! How forcefully we will have begged her to help us, as the Mother of God and our Mother! Continue to do so. May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, intercede for us all and repeat to us always: "*Do whatever He tells you*" (John 2:5).