

“A Celebration of Saints”
Major Presentation by Robert McCarty
National Conference on Catholic Youth Ministry
December 10, 2010

Introduction: I am Bob McCarty and I have the pleasure of serving as the executive director for the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry.

I welcome this opportunity to briefly reflect on our conference theme in light of the In Memoriam video.

Theme: Rejoice— To March with the Saints Is to March with Great Joy!

SO . . . a word about saints

Webster's definition: a holy person, a person who is exceptionally meek, charitable, patient . . . Was Paul or Peter exceptionally meek or patient? Joan of Arc?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes saints as having exceptional fidelity to God . . . closeness to God ... believing that God is always near.

Stories of our Saints and heroes—our company and communion.

I look forward to watching the film, *Lion King*, with my grandson, Thomas. It follows the story of Simba the lion and his father, Musafa. In one scene, Musafa is telling Simba how someday, he'll be the king . . . and Simba is scared about such a responsibility. Then Musafa points up to the stars on that crisp, clear night, and says that the stars are your ancestors and that they will always be there to show Simba the way, the ancestors, the communion of saints.

The film calls attention to the unseen realities present in our world that we often overlook because we are so caught up in the tangible world of everyday life.

In the *Lord of the Rings*, the hobbits live in a magical and mysterious world and they never seem surprised when Gandolf the wizard or Galadriel, the elf queen, just show up—they expect magic and mystery.

Saints are part of this unacknowledged reality for the Christian believer. They serve as moral and spiritual examples, as links to our past, and expand our understanding of what it means to live a Christian life.

Saints are part of the deep reality of life in God—a life lived in communion with the visible and invisible saints all around us. The communion of saints is a Christian symbol that speaks of profound relationship. In traditional usage it points to an ongoing connection between the

living and the dead, implying that the dead have found new life thanks to the merciful power of God. It also suggests a bond of companionship among living persons themselves who form one church community, though widely separated geographically.

We gathered here understand relationship—a connection that sustains us beyond this gathering—it's the heart of youth ministry.

We understand the power of family gatherings, Easter and Christmas dinners, weddings, funerals, graduations and baptisms.

We are aware of who IS there and who IS NOT there.

Every baptism reminds Maggie and I of Jessica Lynn . . . every Thanksgiving reminds me that my mom and Uncle John are missing . . . every youth ministry conference points me towards Sr. Lynn Tooma and Fr. Gary Bagley . . . every time I go to Philadelphia, I know its Mary Jean Hart's and Fr. Chuck Pfeffer's turf.

Saints are not those who are perfect, but those who inspire others to greater faithfulness, and enable others to use their gifts. **Saints tell us what is possible for us**, whether we have one talent or ten, whether we live in sorrow or joy, in days of menace or in a time of hope . . . in the midst of crucifixion (woundedness), **they reveal the everlasting source of joy**—resurrection (death does not win , crucifixion doesn't work). **Saints pay attention** to the signs of creation in the midst of chaos.

We do not always see the saints among us, but that is because we do not see what we are looking at . . . all the people in our lives are saints; it is just that some of them have day jobs and most will never have feast days named for them.

The Catholic Church has saints for everything—we have saints who show us how to pray, preach, parent, make peace, or provide for the poor. We have virgins, martyrs, doctors, kings, clerics, beggars, lepers, missionaries, monks, mothers and teenagers.

We have patron saints for athletes (Sebastian) and cabinet makers (Anne); for civil servants (Thomas More) and fire fighters (Florian); for pastry chefs (Marcellus) and new wine (Martin of Tours), the list goes on and on.

I wonder if we could find a day in the liturgical calendar and declare it “**Normal Person Day?** Perhaps St. Jude, patron of impossible causes, or perhaps St. Dymphna, patron saint of the criminally insane might be an appropriate choice. Ah, forgot—that one is taken by youth ministers already!

Hebrews: 12:1 “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, our communion of saints! What names can we identify in that crowded arena of Hebrew 12? Who have been our guides, our teachers, our companions, the unnamed who have sacrificed to build the Body of Christ throughout two millennia? When we feel overwhelmed, we must remember we have a ‘great cloud of witnesses’ who have gone before us and cheer from the stands.

My personal arena includes Jessica Lynn McCarty, Terry McCarty, John McCarty, Charlie Wilson, John Devinney and Terry Mc Hugh.

As our lives in contemporary North America become ever more complex and confusing, we are intrigued by lives which are lived with unusual purpose and clarity, utterly transparent to a reality beyond themselves. Saints intrigue us religiously because so rarely do we find people of such conviction that what they believe about God shapes their entire existence.

Lawrence Cunningham, from Notre Dame University, defines a saint “as a person so grasped by a religious vision that it becomes central to his or her life in a way that radically changes the person and leads others to glimpse the value of that vision.”

People who risk because of their relationship with God: Sr. Thea Bowman, Mother Lange, Mother Teresa, Bishop Joseph Bernadin, Oscar Romero, and Sr. Mary Mc Killop.

Their vision changes them and changes their lives. What vision are we providing for our children, our young people, our friends that will change them and their lives?

It seems in our society that **our traditional religious and political leaders no longer carry any real moral authority among us**, there is no end to the **shrill voices making unending pronouncements** about what we should do or be, but there are **thin voices carrying a thin message**—be nice to others, recycle, avoid smoking and fatty foods (though I am encouraged by the new ice cream diet!)—when it comes to knowing how to live **what we lack are not voices, but wise guides.**

We want (young people want) a form of living that will stretch our moral and religious imaginations. So, saints are once again catching our attention.

Richard McBrien from Notre Dame University states that saints are holy people—individuals who have, on balance, **lived their lives in conformity with the gospel.** They are as human as any of us, but they somehow managed to rise above the standard of ordinary human behavior and have **manifested heroic virtue, when it counted most.**

We just celebrated the 30th anniversary of the women martyrs in El Salvador, and heroic virtue comes to mind.

We are all attracted by the stories of the rescuers at the **Chilean mine disaster** and how each day the miners divided up tasks, including designating one person to pray.

Don't just *tell* me how to live . . . *show* me how to live. **Saints are flesh and blood signs and reminders of life lived well before God.**

Role models/saints have a curious effect—the more we are surrounded by their witness, the more we are attracted to following their path. Do we live in such a way that makes young people say, **“I want to live the way you live.”**

- Mother Teresa walked the talk
- John Paul II lived his message

Official saints—those canonized—are those considered to have achieved salvation, a word derived from the Latin, **salus, which means health**. To be saved, therefore, means that one has been brought to the fullness of human health, to be made whole. To be made whole by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

And because saints are healthy human beings, they are hopeful rather than despairing, loving rather than mean-spirited, courageous rather than weak, and have a passion for justice. They are disciples, fully human.

We are called to be **saintly**, called to be **holy**, called to be **healthy**.

Seeing the communion of saints as a company of the friends of God locates holiness not in mighty, ideal deeds, but **in creative fidelity** in the midst of everyday life. **Saints know joy**, they rejoice in their relationship with God, and **they know suffering**. But the suffering doesn't blind them to the presence of God.

It's not that saints are perfect, far from it, Augustine committed most every kind of sexual sin, Paul arrested Christians, Peter denied Jesus, and Albert the Great taught that frequent intercourse led to sickness, body odor, baldness and caused the brain to shrink to the size of a pomegranate. He was also the teacher of Thomas Aquinas.

They just believe too deeply in Jesus and in being disciples to let their personal failings get in the way of their ministry! For it is only when we embrace our limitations that we experience real freedom. And saints are free to be faithful.

The church and the world need saints, more than canny politicians, brilliant scientists, adored athletes, overpaid executives and entrepreneurs, and clever talk show hosts. **Saints are those whose lives have been radiated by God's grace**, who seek not to be safe but to be faithful, those who are willing to stand up and be counted, those who have learned how to get along in adversity, who are joyful, who are dream-filled, and above all, who are prayerful. That's what the world— and our young people need most—and it begins with us!

In Ephesians 2:19 we read that “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also **members of the household of God.**”

When the Saints Commune in the household of God, who is there? Peter and Paul, Martha and Mary, Matthew, Mark, and Luke ... This is obvious.

Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, Sr. Thea Bowman, and John XXIII . . . this is likely.

Ita Ford, Maura Clark, Dorothy Kazel, Jean Donovan, Bishop Gerardi and all the Salvadoran martyrs, Father John Kaiser and the Kenyan martyrs, Sr. Dorothy Clark and the Brazilian martyrs ... a wonderful communion.

JFK once said that a country's greatness is reflected not just in the citizens it produces, but also in how it honors and remembers their predecessors.

So we pause and remember the stories of our forebearers—our predecessors—the Catholic youth ministry community of saints.

I invite you to pause, call to mind your saints:

Epiphany of peoples' saints: I invite you to **stand**, verbalize your communion of saints—those whose lives have influenced you—and as you hear the names proclaimed around you, I invite you to respond with **“Pray for us.”** Let your voices **be spontaneous and simultaneous** as we remember our communion of saints.

We pray: God of the Ages, we give you thanks for the multitude of saints that have gone before us. Until we join their ranks, help us honor them by living after their example. Amen.

Rejoice in the stories: you know you are with a saint—and they would be absolutely embarrassed by this statement—when you experience the deep sense of joy felt by being in their presence (Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God).

“Reluctant saints” . . . “resistant saints” . . . “anonymous saints”

We pray for the unsung Saints who fill our lives. I invite you to respond with “Lord, hear our prayer.”

For those . . .

- For those who work with the forgotten young people in treatment programs, detention centers, runaway and homeless shelters, migrant families, immigrant families, we pray to the Lord
- For those youth ministers who attend youth's sports events, drama productions, and concerts, we pray to the Lord
- For those pastors and clergy and lay ecclesial ministers who are absolutely committed to the people in their parish, we pray to the Lord

- For those who raise families while reaching out in service to the young church, we pray to the Lord
- For those who volunteer in parish and school programs, who share their time and their energy with those in need, we pray to the Lord
- For those teenagers who volunteer at their parish, school, or community—who are faith-filled—who take their friendships seriously, we pray to the Lord
- For those who use their financial resources to improve the life of those without resources, we pray to the Lord
- For our "anonymous or reluctant" saints who have so greatly influenced our lives, we pray to the Lord

Conclusion

And so, I rejoice—not just for the communion of saints who preceded us, but I rejoice for the communion of saints that follows us. **I am excited about our young people—about the millennial generation.**

But I don't rejoice because I expect the millennial generation to do what we have done, or to believe the exact same way we've believed. If the criteria of the passing generation applied to the following generation is to “be like us,” how disappointed must have been the parents of Sts. Peter, Paul, John, Mark, Luke, Mary, Martha, Joanna, Phoebe, and the rest, even the parents of Jesus.

For that original Millennial Generation did not experience God the same way as their parents, and didn't express that experience of God in the same way as their parents.

Do we expect the Millennial Generation of today to be the same as us? We must avoid the trap of thinking that God speaks to us and then our mission is to pass that communication on to young people.

I am so excited about the presence of God in the Millennial Generation, and I am challenged by how **their experience of God will cause me to change.**

Ten years ago we left the century that for all our blessings of scientific and technological advances was also the century of the Holocaust, world wars, ethnic cleansings, environmental neglect, and a growing gap between rich and poor nations and peoples.

We are one decade into a new millennium that will be changing at blinding speed. For the church to faithfully carry out its mission in this world, we will **need leaders who lead with foresight vision, and imagination.**

We will need leaders who learn to lead with foresight, paying attention to how both the world and the church are changing.

We will need leaders who lead with vision, who enable us to find in Scripture an alternative dream to the societal dream.

And we will need leaders who enable us to use our imagination to create new ways to advance God's purposes in response to the challenges of today.

So I salute the saints who have preceded us, and I rejoice in the legacy that they have left us.

And **I salute the saints who will follow us**, and I rejoice in the legacy they will create.

And I salute you, each of you, as personally and sincerely as I can from this stage, the saints already present in our church. You, who embody genuine joy, and enflesh the Reign of God.

Because the Reign of God wins, Christmas wins, and Easter wins. The incarnation is real, and Resurrection is an absolute wonder.

Closing Prayer

May the Lord continue to bless you, may you recognize and thank the saints around you, and may this conference be an opportunity for renewal and rejoicing, so that we return to our ministry settings as witnesses to the reign of God, as renewed disciples of Jesus, and filled with the Christmas joy that comes from Marching with the saints.

Thank you.