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Bishop of Rapid City**

**2015 Pastoral Ministry Days  
Terra Sancta Retreat Center**

*I was a Stranger: Welcoming the Stranger through Hospitality*  
March 22-24, 2015

### **CONFERENCE #3: “Experiencing the Face of Christ” ~ March 24, 2015**

Hopefully over the course of this morning we’ve all have taken the opportunity to reflect upon how we, both individually and communally, welcome the stranger among us. In fact, I hope that we all have been challenged in this regard. I know that I have.

This call or this virtue of hospitality is to be taken seriously for all of us, not because I or Fr. Mark or the Diocese is asking everyone to be hospitable or embrace hospitality, but because it is what Christ is inviting us to. He is inviting us to holiness. Hospitality, it seems to me, is another path that leads to holiness.

As I said in my opening conference, if we take this seriously, then hospitality becomes more than what we do, but it is who we become. We become the “face of Christ” to others. In becoming the face of Christ to others, we welcome “strangers” among us into our church; we invite them to enter our world in the hopes that they might discover Jesus and his deep love for them; that they might experience a deeper need for a Savior in their lives, and become part of our parish family who has been redeemed in Christ. Wouldn’t we all want other to experience this?

I am currently reading a book about the life and spirituality of Blessed Mother Teresa [*Mother Teresa’s Secret Fire*]. I think that it is very clear that people everywhere, of every denomination, of every culture, would view her as a holy woman. People saw this beautiful light in her. The question arose about whether we are “unwittingly attributing to her a goodness and a light that belong only to God.” The answer is “No.”

*There is “no contradiction between God’s light and the light we saw in her. Rather than our exalting Mother Teresa, God himself was being exalted in her – it was his light we beheld in here.*

*“Mother Teresa’s beauty reflects the dignity of our role as God-bearers, and our full potential as living temples. We should not be surprised because didn’t Jesus promise that those who believed in him would ‘do the works that I do... greater works than these’ (Jn 14:12)? Did he not declare to the disciples that they were to be the light of the world (cf. Mt 5:14)? This was Jesus’ mandate to Mother Teresa, that she ‘be his radiance’ to the poor, and his light in a world of darkness. And this she did; or this he did in her.” [p. 154]*

We all know how popular Mother Teresa was. When listening to her, people would often find themselves moved to tears. Her message not only attracted the poor and the pious, but the most diverse of audiences. People often times experienced an unexpected stirring of grace in her presence, and a new sense of God’s closeness. I recall when I saw her a couple of times when I

was a seminarian in Rome – just being in her presence, sharing – was very moving. Listening to her challenging message was an experience of grace. Watching her pray stirred in my own heart a deeper desire for prayer in my own life.

How do we explain these experiences the ineffable that took place around Mother Teresa, the sense of the divine so close at hand? What was the meaning of her appeal? In the end, it was about holiness, about the splendor and glory and power of God dwelling in man. Because we have been created in God's image and likeness we all have a capacity for God.

Jean Corbon, in his book *The Wellspring of Worship*, says, “*The most fruitful activity of the human person is to receive God.*” It is this human capacity for God, this activity of receiving God, is what we call holiness. “Holiness is not just man living my God, obeying his laws, but much more. It is *God himself living in man.* Holiness proclaims and gives witness to the supreme value of each human being as a dwelling place of God. Holiness points to the ultimate dignity of our human nature, and to the heights any human can attain, even when burdened with poverty and pain.

Christ revealed himself to the world to the person and ministry of Mother Teresa. As was written in this book, “*Her life had become a transparency for God. Her person, her work, and her message allowed us to see something of God's heart through hers – one smile, one bandage, one word of comfort at a time.*”

*Mother Teresa's lifelong ambition was to give people everywhere, especially the poor, the chance to “look up and see no longer her, but Jesus in her.”* [pg. 161]

You and I are called to the same holiness – to give other the chance to “look up and see no longer us, but Jesus in us”. This is not extraordinary. The grace is available to all of us, like it was for Mother Teresa. Our mission, our call, our vocation is to allow others to see the face of Christ in us – not in some extraordinary way, but in the daily routine of living out our lives.

It is about inviting others into the presence of God through our motives, our actions – welcoming the stranger, being the face and presence of Christ to others; inviting them into our world in the hopes that they might discover Jesus and his deep love for them; perhaps for the first time or perhaps in a deeper way.

We spoke of invitations and how important they are. If we believe that Christ is in us, then the invitation extended to others is from Christ himself. Most would never envision that or think about that. But even the person extending an invitation would also not see themselves as the face of Christ. This is where we all need to be spiritually. Let us pray for the grace to see ourselves as *a transparency for God.*

### **Personal witness:**

Share my own story regarding a welcome at St. Ann's Church by Judy – both a welcome to the parish (“Are you new to the parish?” First time anyone has ever asked me that. And I have shopped around and attended many parishes in my lifetime. Kind of sad, isn't it?)

The invitation to join the choir.

I want to share some video testimonies now which will help us more clearly see how the face of

Christ is revealed to others by the examples of Christian disciples who welcomed the stranger.

<https://youtu.be/TaMsaVsK-Bg>

**Amy Julian** – In this 1<sup>st</sup> testimony you will hear from Amy Julian and her experience some greeters when Amy and her family were visitors at a parish out of state, and how a message of welcome has the power to change a situation, an attitude, into an experience of love. [1:54]

**Brett Bachand** – Remember earlier when I spoke about people who are registered members of the parish can feel like they are anonymous and how introducing yourselves to others, you can be the face of Christ to them. In this 2<sup>nd</sup> testimony Brett Bachand shares an experience that changed things for him as far as how he saw himself in the parish. [1:20]

**Maria Munoz** – Hospitality doesn't always come naturally, especially for kids. Children must be taught that the presence of Christ is in both the giver and receiver. In this next video, Maria Munoz shares a story about hospitality and welcoming the stranger, especially those who are not native to our country. [3:35]

**Doug Stukel** – Hospitality is sometimes letting go of things that we want to do in order to allow others to come forward. It is denying ourselves for the sake of others. Listen now to Doug Stukel's story about his experience of hospitality. [1:55]

**Bridget Decker** – Being the face of Christ to others sometimes requires us listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads us out of our comfort zones because God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit does not honor comfort zones. In this last video, Bridget Decker share her experience of being the face of Christ to another.

As we have heard, being the face or the presence of Christ to others can happen in many ways, but it is always expressed in some form of hospitality or charity.

### **Share another personal story – Bible Study**

All of these experiences were not just coincidences. In the mind of God there is no coincidence. But there have been so many experiences like these that have set me on the path that has led me to the priesthood and eventually becoming a bishop here in this Diocese. Again, in the mind of God there is no coincidence.

I could share many more example of someone's hospitality or some invitation or some way in which a person was the face of Christ to me. Did I always recognize it at the time? No. But as I reflect back on my life, I do see and realize how many encounters impacted my faith and the direction of my life.

### **OBSTACLES**

What Are the Obstacles that keep us from living this life and being the "face of Christ" to others?

1. **Understanding who we are in Christ and our true identity.** Perhaps it is our own ignorance about who we really are or the false image of our self. God has a deep desire for us. Are we seeking God's desire for us?
2. **We ourselves doubt God's goodness in some way.** When this happens, we take over God's role and our life project becomes one of getting rather than giving; look for security in our own way. God's divine plan was not that we become little "gods" – separate, autonomous, and self-serving – but through God's transforming love, we become like God: sharing in God's life, and loving as he loves, freely and fully.

When this happens, we more easily welcome the stranger because we see/experience ourselves as the face of Christ to be presented to others.

3. **We don't take our role in being the face of Christ seriously.**

Perhaps because of fear; fear of rejection; fear of doing it wrong; lack confidence; ambivalence; lack of interest in or time for others, especially those whom we do not know; too busy. We all have many reasons or even excuses.

Perhaps we see our lives as Catholics only in fulfilling the obligation of attending Mass and that is enough. We are lukewarm in our faith at best. In other words, perhaps we have not experienced the conversion in our lives that lead us there.

4. **We cannot be the presence of Jesus if we are encountering him and his love daily in prayer.** We cannot change ourselves, no matter how hard we try. It is Love, His love that changes us. We can only be love into new life; only love can lead us to conversion. The source of all love, the source of all goodness, abides within each one of us. If we were to interrupt our hurried lives and take time to seek his love within us, we would gradually find ourselves "caught up in this love we cannot see." This process can only be stirred up in prayer.

This transformative process begins in the innermost recesses of our soul and then moves outward from there. That Bible study, assisted my daily encounter with the Lord transformed my life. Mother Teresa's transformation came about through prayer. She said, "*My life is simple – I pray.*"

No amount of casual contact with God can change us. No amount of routine contact with God can equal the briefest moments of faith-filled prayer, where we approach God in humility with a deep desire for Him. Our conversion or transformation is only given in a relationship with Him.

The gift of God's love that leads us to live a life of love and hospitality is the fruit of a free and personal decision; one that cannot be coerced or manipulated, but only requested, yearned for, and waited on in prayer. Because it is a "grace," it can only be received, not earned, and certainly not achieved through our own efforts.

These are just some of the obstacles to living out the virtue of hospitality. These are just some of the obstacles which keep us from welcoming the stranger, which keep us from being the face of Christ to others. I am sure that if we all sat down in prayer and asked Jesus, “What are the obstacles in my own life?”, then we would discover a few more.

It is ultimately about loving others because we know deeply and personally of the love of God for us. Pope Francis in the Joy of the Gospel wrote:

*“Loving others is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God; indeed, one who does not love others “walks in the darkness” (1 Jn 2:11), “remains in death” (1 Jn 3:14) and “does not know God” (1 Jn 4:8). Benedict XVI has said that “closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God”,<sup>[209]</sup> and that love is, in the end, the only light which “can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working”.<sup>[210]</sup> When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord’s greatest and most beautiful gifts. Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God. Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God. If we want to advance in the spiritual life, then, we must constantly be missionaries. The work of evangelization enriches the mind and the heart; it opens up spiritual horizons; it makes us more and more sensitive to the workings of the Holy Spirit, and it takes us beyond our limited spiritual constructs. A committed missionary knows the joy of being a spring which spills over and refreshes others. Only the person who feels happiness in seeking the good of others, in desiring their happiness, can be a missionary. This openness of the heart is a source of joy, since “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves up in own comforts. Such a life is nothing less than slow suicide.”* [#272]

Let us all give thanks for the people who, on our life’s journey, have been the face of Christ to us. Let us all pray that the Lord Jesus’ life and presence will come alive in us so that through our ministry of hospitality we give others the chance to “look up and see no longer us, but Jesus in us”.