

October 29, 2016 Bishop James Conley: Dear friends in Christ,

When he came to Omaha, it was a frontier town of just a few thousand people. But it was growing, with immigrants, and laborers, transients, and with families. As it grew, Edward Creighton built the infrastructure of a community rooted in faith. He built churches and sponsored priests; he brought religious sisters to Omaha to establish hospitals. He spoke out against slavery and the mistreatment of native people. He paid just wages. He gave his wife \$25 every day, an amount close to \$400 today, and asked her to buy and distribute whatever poor families needed.

Edward Creighton was serious living as a missionary disciple of Jesus Christ. He served the poor and the sick. He spoke out against injustice, and he worked to end it. His vision has formed generations of young men and women who want to live in this world as Christians. Creighton wasn't perfect, but he was faithful. And that's the legacy of the Church in Nebraska; the legacy of the ordinary Catholics who have come before us.

Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of resting on the fruit of what good Catholics before us have built. We cannot be a Church of maintenance, as George Weigel reminds us in *Evangelical Catholicism*. We are a Church "permanently in mission." God will judge each one of us on whether we have become his disciples, and whether we have made disciples of all nations, as Jesus commanded. We are each called to become the saints the world needs now.

Pope St. John Paul II taught that saints step forward, into a world needing the Gospel, when no one else will. That's what Edward Creighton, along with his wife Mary and his brother John, did.

I have said before that today's America is becoming defined by a kind of utilitarian, technocratic gnosticism. That sounds complicated, but the idea is simple, and I'll explain it:

The moral compass of our political and cultural leaders seems mostly governed by a set of false ideas: That we can define reality according to our preferences. That we can remake every human relationship according to the power of our own wills. That we have the unconditional right to use technology or wealth to overcome the limitations of our humanity, or achieve whatever we think will make us happy.

The sexual revolution told us that freedom means defining the limits of reality for ourselves, instead of encountering, understanding, and accepting reality as it is. Those ideas have roots in the philosophical enlightenment of the 16th Century that begat modern democracy. Christianity has always existed in a kind of uneasy tension with modern democracy. But it took the sexual revolution, begun five decades ago, to tip the balance of that tension, and to pose new and serious challenges for Catholics, and for our nation.

To understand the America we live in, we need to understand that the sexual revolution was really an anthropological revolution. The advent of contraception, and legal protection for abortion expelled the basic biological meaning of sexual intercourse. And when it did, it gave life and energy to the idea that human beings can reverse and refashion a person, a family, and a community.

In just a few decades, the sexual revolution has remade most of what America's cultural and political leaders believe about morality. In a culture where life's meaning is self-defined and technological progress can unshackle human desires from the limitations of our bodies, moral choices seem irrelevant to many people. In place of asking what we ought to do, the only relevant question in a technocracy like ours is what can we do?

In *Technopoly*, Neil Postman says that overly technological cultures, "driven by the impulse to invent, have as their aim a grand reductionism in which human life must find its meaning in machinery and technique."

Here is just one example: Two weeks ago, a Silicon Valley technology company announced that it had raised \$200 million dollars to begin a new initiative: genetically sequencing lab-created embryos, in order to deliver children free from major and minor genetic defects, especially for older couples. This is the technology that can create babies formed to parents' specifications.

Cultural leaders say projects like this give freedom for parents to "have it all." Political leaders rush to give them grants or tax breaks. But we don't consider that projects like these create embryos in laboratories, and then leave them to die. We don't consider the costs of remaking and reshaping human life itself according to our preferences. In a technocracy, ethical concerns are decided by technological ability. We who dare to raise objections are seen as backward, enemies of progress, and so we face very real consequences.

In 1994, Pope St. John Paul II said that this kind of "progress" leads to "a war of the powerful against the weak." We live in that war. The enemies of progress are religious believers who raise concerns about human dignity and objective moral reality. The enemies of technocracy are those who speak for the weak in the face of the powerful. Religious liberty is threatened today mostly because when we speak for the vulnerable, or for the rights of conscience, we dare to call into question the tyranny of progress. There is very little room for the poor, the elderly, the disabled, or the unborn.

Moral decision-making is being reshaped by the technocratic revolution. And each one of us is suffering the consequences. Euthanasia is already legal in three other states. In the debate over euthanasia, one thing has been particularly troubling to me. People who are interested in assisted suicide don't usually report being afraid of pain or suffering. They usually report being afraid of becoming a burden. Sometimes report being afraid of being abandoned. No one should be afraid of burdening his family. But in the technocratic view, there is no greater sin than being a burden.

The fruit of the sexual revolution reduces other people to objects: a means to an end, or as obstacles to our happiness. The fruit of the sexual revolution is a culture that tells our grandparents they are burdens, unplanned pregnancies are to be aborted, and divorce your spouse if you are unhappy: Don't work it out!

When we reduce other people to objects, we lose the relationships that give life meaning. We lose the ability to love. America today is becoming a very lonely place. True friendship is becoming a rare commodity. Each of us knows families who sit at the dinner table, each person staring at his own screen, not sure how to have real and meaningful conversations with one another. Pornography has become a public health crisis, in part because the intimacy required in real marital relationships is becoming too difficult, and is too easily replaced by isolated self-gratification.

The philosopher Matthew Crawford observes that when we aren't careful, our technology turns on us—instead of using tools to achieve our good, our tools can become the standard of goodness.

The America of today is a good and beautiful place. The people are good, earnest, and admirable. But the technocratic revolution, and especially the sexual revolution, has turned on us, and revealed deep social, political, and cultural problems that can only be resolved through Jesus Christ.

How to deal with this? Before we're Americans, before we're anything else, we need to become disciples of Jesus Christ and therefore true friends of Jesus and his Church.

The first point is that we're called to be disciples before all else.

Before we can proclaim Jesus, or witness to him, we need to follow him closely. We need to follow him through Scriptures, praying with Scripture itself, learning how Jesus prayed, and learning how he taught. We need to follow Jesus by following his Church—by living a sacramental life, in which Mass, and confession, and the spiritual life of the Church form the contours of our hearts and minds. We need to learn how Jesus taught, in part by learning how and what the Church teaches. The only way that we can convey Christ is by knowing him, and following him, at every point of our lives.

The Greek word for disciple is "*mathetes*," which literally means "apprentice." As we follow Jesus, we need to become his apprentices. Apprentices learn by watching, by asking questions, by patterning themselves after their masters. Even before they learn his techniques or practices, apprentices learn who the master is, how he carries himself, how he thinks, how he makes judgments. All of those things go into his training. In the medieval world, an apprentice copied his master's work, painstakingly, over and over again, before he attempted his own. He learned his own craft by imitating every piece of his master's life.

The defining characteristic of Christ's life is love which is a sign of contradiction!

Apprentices of Jesus learn love. Love is a sign of contradiction. Love—real, true, sacrificial and self-denying love—has been replaced in popular imagination by romantic sentimentality. And without real love, St. Paul tells us we'll be "resounding gongs" and "clashing symbols." If we really learn to love, as Christ did—if we are apprentices of love—we'll be prepared to transform the world in his name.

My second point is that becoming evangelists today requires that we become signs of contradiction.

GK Chesterton says that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most. If we are going to make disciples in the stark, technocratic, lonely culture of American public life, we need to become signs of contradiction. We embrace what the world rejects: friendship, beauty, goodness, truth, weakness, suffering, joy, and hope. If we are to become the saints, we embrace the dignity of life, living fully and freely in Christ.

Becoming a sign of contradiction is not the same as becoming contrarian. Evangelization is not a war with the world. Nor does becoming a sign of contradiction mean withdrawing from the world. The world is already mired in conflict. Becoming a sign of contradiction means witnessing to something more delightful, more profound, and more meaningful than what our world offers. Evangelization is an invitation, expressed in love, to encounter, love, and serve. Evangelization is a witness to the real peace, joy, and hope of Jesus.

This Thursday, I had the privilege of leading a candlelit Eucharistic procession through the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Over 500 college students walked in the procession. We stopped at three outdoor altars for prayers and benediction: the student union, Memorial Stadium, and "Fraternity and Sorority Row". We sang hymns as we walked. It was a powerful witness of public faith, and a powerful sign of contradiction.

Becoming signs of contradiction means I form authentic families, friendships, and communities. Becoming signs of contradiction means I witness to the freedom that comes from the sacrifice and self-denial of real love. Becoming signs of contradiction means I promote the true, the good, and in our culture, most especially the beautiful. Being signs of contradiction means sharing that Jesus Christ is a person, whom we know, and love, and whom we have experienced loving us.

A few weeks ago, I was invited by friends to a "house concert" in their basement. There were about 20 of us, from different religious and cultural backgrounds. For two hours, we listened to a folk ballad singer, who sang Scottish and Irish ballads, and cowboy songs, and ancient hymns. It was real. It was simple. It was beautiful. It was not utilitarian or self-serving. It was not glamorous or extravagant. That concert was a sign of contradiction to the isolation and self-interest of the world. It moved me to gratitude, to wonder at beauty of song, poetry, the goodness of friendship: the majesty of God.

"House concerts," family celebrations Bible studies, book clubs, and friendships are all signs of contradiction to the world. So is the beauty of the music, and art, and literature of Western culture. So is the ministry of real encounter and friendship with the elderly, the disabled, and the poor. So is the Mass! It is The House Concert. Pope Francis said something very profound at the Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa,

"God saves us by making himself little, near and real."

That's true. Each one of us can know God, love him, follow him because we have the experience of his reality, through which we say "Love looks like this. Truth speaks this way. Salvation has come, in this man, Jesus of Nazareth, who is not a proposition or a conclusion, but a person."

My final point: we should expect, as we become evangelists culture, to face opposition and obstacles.

We face threats to religious liberty in this country because our prophetic voice makes sin uncomfortable. The confidence of believers in the truth of the Gospel is an affront to tyrants. Our witness to charity, even, when juxtaposed with greed and evil in this world, is a threat to those who advance themselves by immorality or selfishness. Believers live in this world, but we do not live like the world lives. For that, since the first days of the Church's life, we face trials and challenges.

Pope Francis says that we're called to be missionaries of mercy. And part of being merciful means telling the truth. Truth without mercy can be cold and harsh, and mercy without truth is a counterfeit. Last week, my friend Archbishop Charles Chaput said that "mercy means nothing – it's just an exercise in sentimentality – without clarity about moral truth." We have an obligation to tell the truth, in love. And we should expect that telling the truth will lead to persecution.

This summer Fr. Jacques Hamel was martyred while celebrating Mass in Rouen, France. I was privileged to be in Rouen one week before his martyrdom. It's easy to believe that Christians in this country might soon face the cross of martyrdom. We are not immune from the persecution the Church has faced for 2,000 years. My friends, we cannot be afraid of that persecution. We live for eternity. And we know that because of Christ's cross, when the Church is persecuted, grace abounds. In that grace is the spread of the Gospel.