

The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey D. Lee, Bishop of Chicago
April 19, 2008 Presentation to the Leadership and Ministry Fair

I am so, so glad to be here with you. I want you to know, especially today, that Bishop Scantlebury is with us, and a number of other people from the diocese, on the devastation of the Sudan. He's there for the enthronement of the archbishop and a fact-finding mission on behalf of the presiding bishops office to monitor what is actually happening on the ground versus what makes it into the press. I had been invited to do that, and I said to the presiding bishop, I'm sorry, I can't. Because I need to be here. But please keep Victor and others of our diocese in your prayers.

I'm going to try to something in about a half an hour that is impossible, and that is to cover all these slides that I've carefully prepared. So, are you ready?

I have a vision for our church, and it is that we become more and more a catechumenal church, a practicing church. I'm going to unpack that word "catechumenal" in a minute. I have a vision of a church that is so engaged in essential practices of the Christian faith, so engaged, so present to those essential practices that I'll try to lay out for you in a minute, at least as I see them, a church that is so engaged in the essential things in the Christian faith that it becomes impossible to ignore us and we become deeply, and irresistibly, attractive.

A church so engaged in the central matters of the Christian faith that controversy simply withers. A church intent on following Christ, and practicing the faith that Christ has delivered into our own hands, that it is profoundly a church not about church. Another transformation of the world.

Jesus Christ, you know, came to do away with religion. And the history of the Christian movement is our constant and futile attempt, ultimately, to turn the way of Jesus back into a religion.

I don't know how we could miss the central or the central images of the gospel; when Jesus breathes his last in the Gospel of John what happens? The curtain, among other things, the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. In other words, God did it. And it needs to be unmistakable. Religion, that system of who's in and who's out, who has access to God and who doesn't, who can control God's favor and who can't--that is all rendered moot.

Jesus came to do away with religion, and to announce that the reign of God was breaking into the world and you could get on board or not. Now the good news, the profound good news for us all, is that God does not need the invisible church. God does not need the church. The reign of God will come with or without us. But we have the mighty good news, an extraordinary, life-changing opportunity to get on board with what God is already doing.

A catechumenal church that is engaged in the essential practices of announcing that reign of God, that Kingdom, is what I dream and hope and want to work for. A catechumenal church that is practicing, practicing, practicing. Catechu-what? Say it with me now: Cat-e-chu-man-al.

Right, catechesis, catechism. What is the catechumenan, and what on earth can a catechumenal church be?

Let me tell you a little story, a little fantasy, from the young church's life. Say, about in the middle of the third century. Elaine Bellis and I have been working together for years in the marketplace, in a city

of the Roman Empire. She's a pomegranate seller. And I am a dealer in purple goods, and our stalls, our stalls have been next to each other for many years, and over the years I've gotten to know Elaine as she sells her pomegranates, the best she can find. And I have noticed that there is something different about her life. There is something way different about her life. When soldiers come through and extort more taxes, she doesn't lapse into bitterness, she finds a way to pay it. I know that she goes off to visit members, friends of hers who are in jail. I know that she doesn't cheat people, like I do sometimes. There's something different about her life.

And over the years I've gotten to know her well enough that one day I ask her, what is it about you, how is it that you live this way? You seem to be free of the anxieties and bitterness and fears that plague me and the rest of mine-- What is it about you. And she knows me well enough, she might say, well, I'm a follower of The Way. If you want to know what that's about, come and meet with me and my friends.

First day of the week next week, let's go. And so early in the morning she picks me up on a Sunday, first day of the week, not a day off. And we go to a converted home and a large person meets us at the door to the courtyard; I later learn that person is a deacon, and a large beefy person who looks through the darkness and says, Who is it? It's me, Elaine, and I've got a friend with me. All right, come on in.

And we join some other people that are in the courtyard, where there is an ancient person leaning on a stick, who I later learn is the bishop, talking to us about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And I knew something about the Jews, but not much. And I'm fascinated, because there are other people there who are wanting the same thing that I want from my friend Elaine. They want to learn how to live like she does.

Over the years, because I'm--that I continue to be in that courtyard, at a certain point, Elaine and the others go into the house. The door's open, and they go in, and I don't know what's going on, we're left out in the courtyard hearing stories about this God.

And I'm learning, over the course of weeks and months and years, how it is that Elaine became the way she is. I'm learning how to practice living in a certain way. I'm learning the faith of Jesus. I'm learning how to live like Jesus. And over the course of time, as my life begins to be shaped more and more like Jesus, at a certain point, near spring, the rest of the community comes to me and says, you know what? You're ready. Do you think you're ready? Are you ready to join us completely in this way of life? And I know by now to know enough that I better take this seriously, because some of our friends have been hauled off and put in prison. But it's worth it. It's worth it.

And so at a certain moment, a certain day, in the spring of the year, I'm fetched in the middle of the night and taken to a place where there's running water, that ancient person leaning on the stick, the deacon wakes him up, and he says the following sentence:

To those of us who have been chosen this year, take off your clothes.

There's no evidence that any of us fainted, or didn't know what he meant. Because we knew we were going to leave behind an old life and enter a new one, we were going to be reborn in it, and to know exactly what that meant, no one told us.

That large beefy person, the deacon, came and got me, took me down into the running water, and the bishop thundered at me, Do you believe in God the Father? And I knew what that meant, and I said, yes! But I didn't know what was going to happen, but that deacon shoves me under the water and brings me up sputtering.

And the bishop thunders at me the next line, And do you believe in God the Son? And I said, Yes, I do. And this time I knew enough to hold my nose as the deacon shoved me under the water and brought me up. And do you believe in God the Holy Spirit and the power of the Church? Yes, I do. Once again, brought up out of the water, and was set upon by elderly bretheners, who poured the most expensive perfumed oil I have ever experienced and gave me a full body rub down. Clothed in white linen, given an oil lamp and told to go stand there while we finished the others.

We were taken back to that house. The doors were flung open for the first time, light and incense and singing spilled out into the night, and we were taken in to share the Eucharist for the first time, as they claimed us and reached forward to touch our oily hair and clothes. And on this night, for the first time and the only time, we were given one other thing, a cup of milk and honey. Food for newborns. And food for entering the promised land.

Well, in the third century, that's what baptism meant. At the same time that was going on in its fully developed form, and that structure of learning to live like Jesus is the catechumenan. At the same time that was going on over the nation, was an extra prayer at Sunday Eucharist. Essential.

I want us to become a catechumenal church. Catechumen come from a Greek word, literally it means a sounding in the ears, but the implication is almost like the words of the teaching hit us and reshaped us. Almost as a physical sense. The catechumenan is not meant to be learning interesting facts about our religious system, but learning to live a different way. Be a different person.

Praying shapes believing, we say. The church has said, anciently, Anglicans of all people have preached this and tried to live it. Praying shapes believing. The way we pray shapes what we believe. That word believe has become corrupted for so many of us, I think. I think, when people ask me, well, what do you believe? What they're really asking is what do you think about. And that's not the Latin word credo, that's the Latin word cogito.

Credo doesn't mean whether you give intellectual assent to, yes, God, uhhuh, uhhuh. Credo means whether you're willing to give your heart to. You will never understand God, thank God. [unclear] has this great line, if you can understand it, it's not God. But are you willing to give your heart to a God who has made himself known.

Baptism is at the heart of our church. Now I love hearing the Book of Common Prayer, 1979, still referred to as the new Prayer Book. But in truth, in truth, in many ways, it is. I think we have not begun to scratch the surface of the profound shift that book represents. That shift is steering us toward being a baptismal church, yeah, even a catechumenal church. With baptism at our heart, the initiation, the full initiation of new believers, not into a religion, but into a way of living for others, is at our heart.

The way we pray, our baptismal liturgy, continues to shape us, and it is, it's gone. It is an ancient future way of being a church. IT was, that little fantasy that I shared with you, was, the way that was celebrated, thank you, the way baptism was celebrated in the ancient world, and I believe the world,

the 21st century, North American society, anyway, bears a lot more resemblance to the church that existed in the late Roman Empire than it does with mid 19th century Victorian England.

We need to become a catechumenal church for the sake of a world in which most people are post-Christian, most people are unchurched or de-churched, as a former bishop of mine used to say. We need to become catechumenal. Relearning the essential practices, acts. Learning the central things. Well, what does the word learning mean? I think it's what we're here to do today. I'd like to talk about learning in three levels: instruction, education, and formation.

Instruction, instruction is what the church has done most of, and it's fairly low-level learning, not to demean it. We need it. It's important. Sunday school in its more traditional format. Our favorite classes, you know, learning interesting things about Henry VIII and the fellows of the Church here is interesting. It may not change your life, unless you want to become like Henry VIII. Interesting. But it's fairly low level.

We do another level of learning that might be called education, educate. Pulling out, reflection on our experiences. The church does some of that, mostly by accident. I have to say. It happens on occasions like these. Someone you love has died. And if you're fortunate enough to be part of a Christian community, that can surround you and help you make sense out of that experience, that's educational. Reflecting on what has happened in your life. A child has been born, in your heart of a Christian community can help you reflect on the meaning that it does take a village to raise a child. A Christian one, anyway.

We do it in preparation for sacraments, sometimes. I think we're getting better at things like EFM, which has theological reflection at its heart, building upon our lived experience. But there is a deeper level of learning, and we do this only when we are--it's going on all the time, but the way. But it's only genuine and positive Christian formation when we're intentional about it. Formation is the experience itself upon which we reflect.

It happens in liturgy, it happens in mission, it happens in our practices, it happens in the catechesis of the Good Shepherd, which is age appropriate catechumenist. For children. How were you received, who smiled at you, how were you touched? Who fed you? What did they say when they fed you? What have you experienced when I'm relaying my pomegranate seller friend? She formed me. She formed me. It happens when we are apprenticed to one another.

We need to engage in all of these things, but I think in reverse order. We usually start with instruction, and work our way down. And it needs to be the other way. We need to celebrate liturgies like we mean it, don't you love the baptismal font here? Say, yes!

We can prattle on all we want to about baptism being birth-like drowning; it's what we say. Isn't it? A newborn Christian out of these waters; it is difficult to believe it when our practice of the sacrament of baptism is reduced to three drops of water passing through three centimeters of hair. No one ever drowned from being dribbled on.

To use enough water that to suggest this is a dangerous way of life, and a challenging one, is not a peripheral concern. We're talking about formation. If you have, if you are lucky enough to have adult candidates for baptism, get a tank, get a wading pool, get a horse trough, go to a spring, or something to suggest that they are leaving behind one identity and entering a new life.

You know what the rubric for Holy Baptism says in the 1662 Prayer Book, mind you, Church of England. It says, and I quote, here shall the priest discretely dip the infant in the font. Immersion is traditional in Anglican practice. I could say more.

What are the central things we need to engage in? What are the central practices of the Christian faith? There are formational markers, formational, central things. The first essential thing, we need to learn, and relearn, and relearn over and over again is the assembly itself. There is one for you. An assembly of Christians. This is a groovy church in San Francisco, St. Gregory of Nyssa, where there are no pews, there's a dance floor. And so, when you enter, I know, it's frightening, when you enter this church, the deacon comes out and doesn't say, May the Lord be with you, he says, Good Morning, we're going to learn the dance steps this morning.

But talk about formation. To enter a church with pews, if you look down at it, do you ever think about this? I have. It looks a little bit like the floorplan of a theatre or maybe an airliner. And what are you supposed to do when you get on an airplane? Sit down, shut up, listen to the instructions, and pay your ticket. Sounds like a lot of churches.

But if you enter an open room where you can move around a little bit, a great Roman Catholic liturgical scholar says that pews in a church are like bleachers on a basketball court.

So there's one assembly. Here's another one. The assembly itself is the principle sign of the presence of Jesus. You and me. Christ's own beloved. We're the sign. We are the church, are we not? Paul's theology of the body of Christ, he wasn't kidding, he says, you are the body of Christ. He's not kidding. We are the sacramental presence of Christ, the risen one, in this broken world. So, when we come in and carefully approach his holy table, an icon, oh, my God, you know, turn around, and profoundly reverence the mystery sitting right here.

We have to learn it, and relearn it, and relearn it, and I'll tell you what. If you were learning, and relearning, and relearning, the holiness of the assembly of God's people, it would set things like vestry fights in a little different context.

We can fight and argue till the cows come home, but reverence each other before and after; it's not an option.

The body of Christ, equipped for every thing it needs to move and grow and live its mission. I was struck this week by the breathless descriptions of the papal liturgies and, I don't know if you saw this, but certain voices in the Roman Catholic Church were raising questions about the lack of lay ministers in liturgical celebrations. Eucharistic ministers will do that, in the article I read. And, some commentator from within the church reminded his Roman Catholic friends that the title for lay eucharistic minister in the Roman Catholic church is extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. Only when there are insufficient numbers of priests and or deacons are lay people permitted to touch the body of Christ.

Not among us. Not among us.

The next central thing, the font. What more to say about the font? Here's an early one. From Israel, I'm walking down the steps into that water, a priest or deacon standing on the arms of cross, to plunge you

head first into the waters of chaos and death, and walk you up out of the tomb that is the womb of the church into your new life.

If I've done nothing else ever for the Church of God, the church I planted and helped to plant in Indianapolis, Indiana, has a font that is not unlike that. A poured concrete Greek cross in the middle of the floor. It's the only thing not movable in the worship space. And the woman who succeeded me there as priest walked in one day and the lights hadn't been turned on yet, and she bumped her shin on the font, didn't fall in, I know that's what you were thinking. Bumped her shin on the font and with stifled curses, like oh that font, and then she went, oh. Right. Perhaps we all ought to bump our shins on the font regularly.

This is our way of life. We are people in the water, emerging from the water into life, gasping for air, and blinking in the light of Christ shining into our eyes. Let's go on.

Word, the third central thing. There we are, at a recent liturgical celebration near [unclear, laughter [00:23:43.16]]. We are called to learn and relearn and relearn the Holy Scriptures. We should be people who are marinated in it. Marinated in it until we are tender and juicy. And Episcopalians know more of the Bible than we think we do. There's a great exercise I commend to you sometime. String up newsprint on the wall and ask people to just tell a story. Tell me any name you remember and yeah, yeah, shepherd, Mary, write them down, Moses, write, Joshua, write. And then you start listing it up there, we know the whole story, or at least we think we do. Know the Bible, people. Marinate in the Word of God, remember the Word of God is not a book. Even Martin Luther held the Bible as not the Word of God, it's the cradle of the Word of God. Right. I'm standing in a Lutheran seminary, I have to quote Martin Luther.

Jesus Christ himself is the Word of God, living and growing, alarmingly so, alarmingly so.

Know the Bible and remember it's the cradle of the Word of God.

Next central thing, the altar table and all that it represents. The altar table is that place where we regularly encounter the one who has claimed us, signed us, branded us and made us his own. The one who gathers us, still at table, feeds us from his own broken, deathless life, and sends us out to be the food that we have received. Augustan, once again, who, we were told, used the whole of the bread of the Eucharist with these words:

Be what you see! Receive who you are.

You are the bread on this table. Your lives will be taken, blessed, broken, and given for the life of this hungry world. Justice proceeds from this table. We cannot come to this table where all distinctions are done away with, theoretically, at least, talk about formation. Rich and poor, high and low, despised and beloved, loved, lovely and unlovable all come to receive the same bit of food, the food of wayfarers, the food of the poor, all our families, this is what God has in mind for the world. All will receive what they need and not as matter of charity, but justice. Radical welcome; radical welcome. Lots to be said about so called open communion. Any priests in the room here? Ever been presented with someone you weren't sure that they were baptized or not and held up their hands? What did you do?

You feed them. Now, if we know they're not baptized, I'm going to have a conversation with them. Watch where you sit. What's the deepest kind of hospitality you can exercise for you? And it may not

just be saying all come, sit down. That's one kind of hospitality. There may be a deeper kind. Think ancient and renewed, deeper kind. We took people seriously enough to say, this is not just any old meal. This is the bread of life, this is the cup of salvation, and it will demand something of you, and you should know that.

Once, when I was in a parish in Indiana, as kind of out of the ordinary, I was there to meet a search committee, and it was a really great parish that understood a lot of this life to be this kind of catechumenal, be engaged with the central practices. They had a great supply of priests there, on a Sunday morning, and I took my place in the pew midway back, not in the front rows, midway back, and the signup to the liturgy was good, it was lively, the distribution of ministries, and all God's people, and it came time for communion. I took my place in the communion procession up to the altar rail, got there, the good supply priests who had just reached the sermon on the dignity of baptismal ministry, coming by body of Christ, Body of Christ, Body of Christ, he came to me, dressed like this, and fished around in his saporium, some of you know what I'm going to say, for a piece of priest's host. You know, the thicker wafer? Another reason they use loaf bread in the Bible.

With that moment, it was the best of intentions, out of a deep seated piety, he turned the Eucharist into a betrayal of itself. There is not one food for the baptized and another special food for the somewhat more than baptized. Formatial. Formation. Formation. Are symbols of sacra. Are we all made one at this table or are we not?

Lest you think all this is the latest enthusiasm of the bishop from Chicago, this is our DNA. A woodcut from about the time of Elizabeth I. There are many things to know about this woodcut, what's one? It's the symbol of the monarch, the central thing for the full display. There is a preacher, there is an approachable, surroundable table of the Lord in the midst of the people. There are bunches of people gathered around the font, dipping an infant in it. And there's even a woman at the door going, Anybody want to come in? It's our DNA as Anglican Christians. The central, central thing.

Some of you will know the word of the Evangelical author Brian McLaren, who's a hot ticket these days. Brian McLaren, the pastor of a church in Maryland, an independent--he's not there now, he's off on speaking tours and writing books. He wrote a book called *A Generous Orthodoxy* that I highly recommend, in this book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, chapter by chapter he appreciates the gifts that each major strand of the Christian tradition has to give. On Roman Catholics, he said, they have the gift of contemplative practice. Of his own evangelical tradition, he said, they give the gift of enthusiasm. They're wrong about many things, he said, but they're enthusiastic. And, of us, he puts Anglicans and Anabaptists in the same chapter. The first time the Episcopalians and the Amish have ever been paired anywhere. Because, he says, at the time of the Reformation, the Anabaptist tradition and Anglican tradition both steered Christianity away from the realm of purely speculative theology and into the realm of practice.

Anabaptists, think Amish, Mennonites, they practice the ethics of community. Barn raising. They take care of things. And of Anglicans, one of the most beautiful things I think that has ever been said about us. He said, Anglicans practice the beauty of God. He said Anglicans are by God's beauty.

This catechumenal way of life, this deeply attractive way of life, I long for, and I work for, it's a beautiful, beautiful thing. Who can resist being dazzled by us? A lot of people, apparently.

But dear friends, dear friends, no one, no creature, can resist being dazzled by the beauty of God. Let us pray to become more and more transparent in God's beauty. Let us pray to become a church that's not about church, but about the body of Christ in the power of God's spirit.

If you have to say something, right now, about a beautiful thing, we're going to say again, too, but if the technology will not fail us, the refrain is this, Let your service and love be a beautiful thing.