

# Teach What You Believe

Penny Carroll

Thank you for this invitation to address this topic, “Teach What You Believe” at this National Conference. I want to begin with Michael Card’s song, *The Basin and the Towel*.<sup>1</sup>

I want to lay a foundation for this talk with two quotes. Firstly from Basil Hume, Humility is facing the truth”, which speaks into my own life, my experience of diaconate, and my understanding of teaching and believing. Secondly, with the words of Søren Kierkegaard<sup>2</sup>: “If I could wish for something, I would wish for neither wealth nor power, but a passion for possibility.”

These words embrace my hope for this session that together you and I will be open to a new humility and new possibilities as the Holy Spirit inspires each of us to think differently, to teach differently, to preach differently, to believe differently and to live differently even if in just one small way. Teaching and believing, it seems are processes in which we engage together, as meaning making happens in the space between speaker and listener where we are all teachers and listeners.

I began with the song “The Basin and Towel” to remind us all of our call to service. This call to service is our common call as Jesus’ disciples. Your ministry as deacons, in the words of Pope John Paul II, is the Church’s service sacramentalized<sup>3</sup>. My service and that of the other women here, is in response to our baptismal call.

I hope the words and images invited you to remember your ordination especially when you lay prostrate before the altar: a sign of abandonment to the love of God; a sign of your pledge of obedience to the bishop; a sign of your unworthiness, for you are all sinners in need of God’s grace and a sign of total dependence on God. Ultimately it was a sign of humility, that of facing the truth of who you are and who God is. As you lay there on that on that hard cold floor, or was it a speckled carpet, with the litany being sung, perhaps you were conscious of being held, knowing the presence of many people: your wife and family, friends, fellow disciples gathered, but held by a much larger and more powerful Presence.

Do you recall the Bishop handing you the book of the Gospels with those words you are hearing over these days: *Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach?*

As you recall that momentous day, what were your hopes and dreams for this ministry? How have they been fulfilled? What has disappointed you? When have you felt like those two famous but unnamed disciples on the road to Emmaus whose hopes were not fulfilled? Even as they thought that Jesus had failed them, he walked with them and talked with them, teaching them anew about love and faithfulness and hope. When he disappeared from sight, did they not recall his powerful presence in his absence? What are the possibilities still burning within you since your ordination?

I was in Ireland recently, and was given a copy of paper by Philip Pinto the Congregational Leader of the Christian Brothers, titled: “Out of Darkness Colour Breaks: Speak a new language, so that the world will be a new world”.<sup>4</sup> He said:

<sup>1</sup> Michael Card, *The Basin and the Towel*. Lyrics are available on <http://www.songlyrics.com/michael-card/the-basin-and-the-towel-lyrics/>

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher and theologian who died in 1855 at the age of 42

<sup>3</sup> USCCB, *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, (2009) 36

<sup>4</sup> Philip Pinto, *Out of Darkness Colour Breaks: Speak a new language, so that the world will be a new world*, CORI Conference, Dublin, 7 May 2011,

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*One of the questions I put to my Brothers is to ask if they can name one thing they know about God that they did not read in a book or that someone did not tell them....And the amazing thing is that this one thing is the most important thing about God for me. I am constantly learning more and more about God, about this Mystery at the centre of my being. And if my image of God is static, then I am in relationship with an idol. If the image of God that governs my life today is the same as it was five years ago, then I am worshipping an idol. And I worship an idol every time I refuse to allow change into my life...*

These are challenging words. This conference provide you with an opportunity to reflect on, not only what you *do*, but also *who you are* and *what you believe*, that your teaching and preaching might become more and more believable. It seems that those who continue to be believable teachers and preachers are those people, who as Philip Pinto suggests, are always learning and growing as they become more and more integrated and authentic human beings. A footnote to this comment is to encourage you, if you haven't already done so, to read John Chalmers' article: "Reflections on (nearly) Forty Years of Preaching" on the ausdeacons website. I found it the other day. As both a former student and colleague of his, he is the most believable teacher and preacher I have ever heard, a person who is always discovering something new, something fresh, something more.

I am going to speak firstly about believing, then how and when you teach and then proposes a framework for how you can keep getting there- how you can keep on growing into who you are.

### **How has your believing changed?**

Pinto spoke about his image of God. How has your image of God changed over time? How has your believing changed?

"The believer is always in a state of being converted through an ongoing process of learning and dialogue on faith's meaning," Tony Kelly asserts. He continues: "the summons of something more does not cease and the way forward is in deeper humility and trust. Faith must work itself out in love, if the mysteries we confess are to be real in our world and in our lives."<sup>5</sup>

Roberta Bondi opens up two worlds of believing that fought within herself. As a Church historian teaching in a seminary, she came to understand that what she believed in her *head* and taught her students, she did not really believe in her *heart*. She *wanted* to believe that God was loving, but what she *really* believed was that God's favourite activity was criticizing and condemning."<sup>6</sup> This overriding image of God deeply embedded in her heart, was formed through her childhood experiences of her own father and the Baptist revival preacher who were exacting, domineering and always waiting it seemed, to catch her out in her sins. She wanted to believe in the God of love that she found in the writings of the founders of early Egyptian and Syrian monasticism. After a long and intense struggle she faced her reality that the very mention of God as father filled her with a sense of inadequacy, helplessness and depression. Despite much inner pain, she trusted her early century teachers, and through sheer persistence, came to know in her heart the God who is love. She offers a powerful insight "that healing comes not by avoiding but by facing what we are most of afraid of facing."<sup>7</sup>

Five adjectives occur consistently in the Old Testament, according to Walter Brueggemann. He calls them the credo of adjectives. They describe God as merciful, gracious, faithful, forgiving and steadfast in love.<sup>8</sup> Do these adjectives describe the God you know? Is this head knowledge or heart knowledge? How might this challenge you to examine and name deep heart beliefs of God that may differ from what your head says and invite you to that ongoing conversion of which Tony Kelly speaks? While Bondi's experience was

<sup>5</sup> Tony Kelly Csr, *The Creed by Heart*, 30

<sup>6</sup> Roberta Bondi, *Memories of God: Theological Reflection on a Life* (1995) 13

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 45

<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, cited in Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden*, (St Anthony Messenger Press, 2007) 10

foreign to me and perhaps to most of you, it is the reality of many women and some men to whom you minister. Humility invites you to face this and to use a variety of ways and metaphors that are in the scriptures to name the God who is love. This is not about political correctness or feminism but surely out of concern to gather in those whose early images of God prevent them from entering into what God has for them.

### **So, how and when you teach?**

I want to offer a broader perspective of teaching than the teaching that happens when you preach. The words, "teach what you believe" are probably truer than we realize. I believe that we do teach what we believe, for good or for ill, because we teach *who we are*.<sup>9</sup>

People may never remember a word you uttered, but they will remember who you are and how you treated them. I am sure you have heard the words attributed to perhaps one of the most famous deacons in church history, St Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words."

Basil Hume, the much loved Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster is a great example for us of one who lived these words. After his death in 1999, the London *Times* concluded its obituary with a remarkable accolade: "Few churchmen in this century, inside or outside the Catholic Church have died more deeply loved." His funeral was a national event, confirmed by the presence of the British and Irish Prime Ministers and the Duchess of Kent as the Queen's representative. BBC1 televised the two hour event, live and uninterrupted.

Cardinal Hume was much loved by all manner of people. He personally helped many who were homeless and victims of injustice. Ordinary Catholics whom he met were often astounded when a conversation ended with the invitation to "come to tea" and talk further. He is remembered for his warmth, compassion and as one of Britain's foremost spiritual leaders.<sup>10</sup>

In a book I borrowed from a friend, I found a holy card that was circulated after his death, using the words from one of his books.

*A priest started his homily at a funeral saying, 'I am going to preach about judgement.' There was [discomfort] in the congregation. Then he went on: 'Judgement is whispering into the ear of a merciful and compassionate God the story of my life which I had never been able to tell.'*

*Many of us have a story, or part of one at any rate, about which we have never been able to speak to anyone. Fear of being misunderstood, inability to understand ourselves, ignorance of the darker side of our hidden lives, or just shame, make it very difficult for many people.....What a relief it will be to be able to whisper freely and fully into that merciful and compassionate ear. After all that is what He has always wanted.<sup>11</sup>*

These words tell us that Basil Hume knew God to be loving, merciful and compassionate. Out of this deep belief, flowed not only his words but also his actions: "come to tea and talk further." He was a good teacher because he was first a good witness mirroring the words of Pope Paul VI of almost forty years ago when he spoke of people needing witnesses more than teachers.<sup>12</sup> For your teaching to be credible your witness must go beyond the exercise of your ministry in liturgy and your proclamation and preaching to include the ways you engage with people in ordinary human ways. In your family and work lives, in your neighbourhoods and places of recreation, you do not cease from being a deacon. Teaching begins and ends with listening. Teaching is not confined to preaching but does include it. This calls for multiple ways of listening to hear the word of God in the scriptures, in your own life, in your faith

<sup>9</sup> Parker Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, (Jossey-Bass, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.ad2000.com.au/articles/1999/aug1999p7\\_315.html](http://www.ad2000.com.au/articles/1999/aug1999p7_315.html)

<sup>11</sup> Basil Hume, *To Be a Pilgrim*

<sup>12</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (1974) 42

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community, in your local community, in your nation and in the world. For God is as present in the community gathered as in the Word proclaimed. How often do you invite concrete feedback from parishioners? To hear what your hearers have to say can be a humbling experience. If you are open, they can bring to you hearing the cries of people in your parish or where you minister. Listen for and reflect on: What are the issues ordinary people bring to Eucharist or ceremonies where you preside? Where is pain and brokenness? How might what you teach and preach impact on one who comes carrying the news of a recently diagnosed life threatening illness or that of a loved one; or one who grieves the loss of a child even years after the event; or one who comes alone disconnected from family; or one who brings a child with autism feeling the weight of judgment as their child appears of control, or one who comes with a broken heart or a broken family or feeling the shame of something happening in their family?

Frederick Buechner points out that the Hebrew word “dabar”, means both word and action.<sup>13</sup> When you speak, something gets created, you make something happen for good or for ill. This is a powerful reality. “And the Word became flesh...” and as Fr Bill O’Shea said yesterday, you make Jesus present through the proclamation and preaching of the word, as in a sense, as Jesus becomes flesh through your “dabar” your word and action.

The opening song reminded us that it is day after day that you must take up the basin and towel, in every ordinary place, in every ordinary day in your ministry as servants of the word, liturgy, charity and justice, the fourth component which the US Bishops added<sup>14</sup>, where none of these is to be excluded. Pastoral ministry in particular provides key moments for you to teach who and where God is, especially in times of crisis, grief, uncertainty, doubt and fear. Funerals, weddings baptisms are just as much pastoral encounters as liturgical events. I want to share a few examples of pastoral ministry.

Ten years ago, my life was broken open by what for me was the most unimaginable loss. I felt shattered, abandoned, and very alone. In my deep bewilderment and shock, those people who acknowledged me and my pain allowed me to feel contained, held and visible in my darkness. Sometimes it was their silent and compassionate presence, and a few simple words that held me. My parish priest with whom I worked expressed his own shock saying: “I can’t believe this has happened!” This was amazingly comforting because his shock seemed to cushion mine as I felt that somebody else understood something of what I was experiencing. A card or a note sent to me provided me with a sense that I was not invisible. Another person said to me a number of times, very simply: “You have lost so much.” Those words validated my reality and my pain. In those early days of crisis, I valued those people who could listen to me and be present without trying to theologize or theorize, dry my tears, cheer me up or tell me to move on.

Paula D’Arcy was 27, three months pregnant and driving with her husband and 20 month old daughter when their car was hit by a drunken driver. She survived, but her husband and daughter died. Some years later, a friend had arranged for her to meet Dr Norman Vincent Peale. Only going to placate her friend she imagined that he would be waiting for her with a huge Bible, and would quote scripture at her. Instead he welcomed her and invited her to sit down on the couch. He sat next to her and said: “Paula would you like to tell me your story”. It was the first time that she had told all of her story and wept as she told it. He *never* interrupted. Sometimes she saw the tears in his eyes. He reached out and touched her arm gently a few times. When she finished he said: “Young woman, you have a huge challenge ahead of you.” she asked, “What’s that?” He replied, “Discovering the purpose of your life.”

To quote her: “I looked him in the eye and said: Dr Peale, when my husband and daughter died, I lost the purpose for my life. He looked deeply into me and answered: ‘You lost the purpose you wanted, but there is another purpose for your life’. I asked how he knew that and he replied, ‘because you are alive’. He trusted me. He didn’t tell me what to do but trusted me to find that purpose.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*

<sup>14</sup> USCCB, *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, (2009) 38

<sup>15</sup> Paula D’Arcy, *A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, Audio CD, Richard Rohr & Paula D’Arcy, St. Anthony Messenger Press  
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This simple encounter changed the direction of her life. She became a psychotherapist working with grieving people, and is a writer, retreat leader and conference speaker who travels widely internationally. She is also president of a foundation, which supports women in prison and those living in third world or disadvantaged cultures.

Parker Palmer tells of being in deep depression. Some who visited him tried to cheer him up or tell him how good he was. Neither approach really helped. Another person asked if he might visit. He asked Parker's permission to massage his feet. He stopped by each afternoon, took his friends shoes and socks off and simply massaged his feet. Words were not necessary but the experience was life-giving for Parker.<sup>16</sup>

"You have lost so much."

"Paula, would you like to tell me your story."

"He trusted me. He didn't tell me what to do but trusted me to find that purpose."

"He came and took off my shoes and socks and sat in silence massaging my feet."

Simple but powerful words and actions which offered the possibility of healing through validation, attentive listening and compassionate presence, and minimal questions.

I visited a man, now in his seventies and his wife whom I have known for over fifty years after their home was flooded in January. He has been a committed and practicing Anglican for most of his life. When I asked him how he was doing, he pointed his finger heavenwards and shouted with expletives at God whose fault it all was because of all this rain, all this flooding, all this disaster.

It seems that he is not alone in his experience. Jesus too experienced the absence of God as he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me" to his Father who remained silent to his suffering. Surely, that same Jesus now prays with people in anguish, even as they shout in rage and point their finger heavenwards. Is not God, who is love, big enough and gracious enough to hold us however we express our anguish? What a privilege you have to be invited into the most intimate and heart rending moments of people's lives. How humbling it is for you to learn to do nothing, to feel utterly helpless as you stand with those in pain, to be there as Mary was at the foot of the cross, with your silent and compassionate presence or no words that can change anything.

### **A framework for how you can keep getting there.**

Finally, I want to offer a framework for how you might become aware of how you live the paschal mystery, not only for your own sake but also for those to whom you minister. You can teach more authentically, what you yourself have learnt and you lead people along the journey with deep passion if you have already taken it. As many spiritual writers teach, the way to God is down. Paul had to fall off a horse and Peter betray Jesus in order to enter into a deeper relationship with God. Even Zechariah, described in Luke's Gospel as "righteous before God and living a blamelessly" learned that his not believing came with a big price tag. His enforced silence led to greater praise of God, that song which you prayer each morning.

Something in life, sometime, will trip us up and bring us down, and if we allow God to do what needs to be done in us, it takes us deeper into God.<sup>17</sup> You lay on the floor as a sign of humility and because you are human, life will bring each of you to your knees. You will, if you have not already, have to face the truth of weakness, sin, sickness, loss, failure, disappointment, self-righteousness or willfulness. You will be sent to places you do not want to go, asked to do things you do not want to do, or find yourself doing what you least want to do. If you are to name and make real the truth about life for others you first have to recognize that in your own life. We are all people called to the walk the way of the cross.

<sup>16</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, (2000) 63

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 69, and Richard Rohr, *Loving the Two Halves of Life* (DVD)

The central symbol of our faith is the crucifix. The crucifix is where we behold both love and suffering coexisting. This cross, this sacred symbol teaches us that the path to life is found through death. To gain our life, we must lose it. We begin every liturgical celebration signing ourselves and this simple but powerful ritual ought to remind us of our call to walk the way of the cross.

I have taken the following framework from the work of Parker Palmer. He calls it the inner stations of the Cross. He names five stations on the journey of each person. Palmer says: "By speaking of these stations, we can grow in awareness of the path we are on, learn what we need to learn, and grow in faith and hope of the journey's destination."<sup>18</sup> These inner stations need not occur in the order I will give them and can occur over and over again. I suspect that many of you who have experienced significant loss or dishevel, will recognize this pattern in your own life.

### **1. Recognition: the first station.**

The cross is part of every life, there is no love without suffering. Contradiction is at the heart of human experience. Each of us holds within good and evil, light and darkness, love and hate. Yet in darkness God brings light, in the midst of despair, hope and new life emerges from death. Living the paschal mystery is our reality. It is played out over and over again. Through death, resurrection comes. As those who teach, you need to tell the truth and name the suffering as well as the love, the absence of God as well as the presence, the silence of God as well as the voice of God because people know these things in their lives and need you to name them.<sup>19</sup> Listen for and tell stories of those who triumph over evil, and those who transcend tragedy. When their life seemed over, through loss or tragedy, they grasped life in a new and more powerful way. Surely these are graced events. Australian Story on the ABC provides wonderful examples of ordinary people who have done this, just as you meet ordinary people who also have powerful stories to tell

Recognizing and naming this cruciform nature of reality, allows us to see that life is not fixed. In whatever difficulty we face, God is always moving amongst us waiting to transform pain and suffering. As we recognize our own suffering, trials or darkness, and allow it to teach us the lessons we need to learn, we will open the possibility to others of saying yes to life in a different form.

### **2. Resistance: the second station**

Have you ever noticed how we resist change, loss, and circumstances that happen that are beyond our control? "Life happens when we are making other plans," said John Lennon. Avoidance and resistance are not only natural, they are also futile, because life happens, stuff happens. It is through resistance, that we wrestle with God as Jacob did with the angel of God saying, "I will not let you go till you bless me." What I can no longer do stretches me and breaks me open to discover what I can do. Gifts and untapped potential emerge from within. As life breaks us open, a deeper, wider reality of who I am and who God is, offers a new reality, a new way of being.

### **3. Acceptance: the third station**

It is sometimes in the struggle of resistance that our image of God, who we thought God to be, is shattered. It is on the cross of loss, failure, disillusionment or whatever situation we are invited to die to, that we discover that the cross is the place of total powerlessness. I gained a wonderful insight into this from Ronald Rolheiser<sup>20</sup>. He says that passion really mean passivity, that when Jesus gave his will over to God the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane (after the struggle when he sweated blood), from then on he was passive. He no longer resisted, but allowed what was to happen to him, to be done unto him.

<sup>18</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of the Contradictions of the Christian Life* (1980) 39.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (New York, HarperCollins, 1971)103

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *Loving the Two Halves of Life* (DVD)

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When we embrace the powerlessness of the cross, we arrive at the place of power, where good triumphs over evil and life triumphs over death as the cross no longer has power over us.<sup>21</sup> As we accept a difficult reality, an empty space is created in us for God's power to flow through us. God needs an empty space in order for his glory to be revealed. "It is humility that makes for God an empty space in which God may dwell and his glory seen," according to Timothy Radcliffe.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Affirmation: the fourth station

To cease struggling, to arrive at acceptance and to allow God to do in us what needs to be done, is a lonely journey. *Alone with none but thee, O God, I journey on my way...* Once there we discover another contradiction. As we are changed, our focus moves from our own suffering and we see the suffering of others. We weep at the brokenness of the world, for the tragedies around us. With new eyes we see that we are all wounded, scarred, sinful and fragile and we can find in ourselves compassion even for those who cause pain. On the other hand, Palmer says, if we only present ourselves to the world as smooth and seamless, we allow others no way in, and there is no way to engage in life together. It was the righteous and self-righteous older brother in Luke's parable of the two sons who missed out on the best party and his father's longing embrace. When we acknowledge the shape of the cross in our lives, we open a space within us and between us where community can occur.<sup>23</sup> We make this real for others by letting them know that we too struggle, that we too we bleed and weep. We too cry out for God to hear us when our lives or our kids are not perfect. We too need God's grace.

#### 6. Liberation: the fifth station

The finest fruit of the cross is liberation, not because freedom is an end in itself but because as we become free, God can use us more powerfully<sup>24</sup>. In freedom, we need no longer fear darkness and death, for we know the way leads to life. As we more fully lose our lives for others, our own lives become richer. Freedom allows us to relinquish control as we allow God's Spirit to move where God chooses. It is no longer up to us. Freedom teaches us that there is no contradiction which God cannot overcome. Out of this freedom you can name to others out of heart knowledge and belief: "Do not be afraid. God is with us. God loves each of us with an everlasting love. God's mercy is for every person. God's forgiveness and faithfulness are for all. God's steadfast love endures through all things."

My male friends who are serious about the spiritual journey tell me that getting in touch with the inside, the empty places, the wounds and disappointments, usually through upheaval and dislocation, is particularly difficult for men, trained as they are to deny or ignore pain and grief, to overcome weakness and to suppress desire. I asked one to read this paper and he said: "Recognition, Resistance, and Acceptance can be bitter pills, hard mountains to climb, and in deep darkness. 'Manly' natural training is often to avoid this journey altogether. We think we must remain strong. Then unprocessed but valid grief often surfaces as anger, depression and confusion."<sup>25</sup>

Lastly I was to name these stations more simply and succinctly:

Recognition says: Life is hard, the way is through the narrow gate.

Resistance says: You are going to die, that is the one certainty in life.

Acceptance says: You are not in control.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 46

<sup>22</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, "The Throne of God" in Timothy Radcliffe, *I Call You Friends*, (New York, Continuum, 2001)109

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 49

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 51

<sup>25</sup> Peter Shakhovskoy now works full time across Australia with men who are serious about their spiritual journey.

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Affirmation says: You are not all that important, there is much more pain in the world beyond your own.

Liberation says: It's not about you; it's about the service of the Kingdom of God

I offer you this framework of the five inward stations not just as a theory. When I found it, it resonated with my own experience and that of many people who having faced the reality of the cross in their lives and know its power of transformation. While many of them and you yourselves may not have named their experience in this way, they have come to discover a more expansive vision of God and God's people. I hope this is an invitation to each of you to keep allowing God to do in you what needs to be done in you, so that you will bring to your teaching and believing, your preaching and living, a passion that opens possibilities of fullness of life for others.