

# Thoughts on our Church: The Gospel voice within us

**By Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien**

*Editor's note: The following text is excerpted from Cardinal O'Brien's Mass of Thanksgiving homily, given March 4 at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, Baltimore, Maryland.*

Since this is a Mass of Thanksgiving, may I begin by thanking each of you for your presence here today, as well as the many more, near and far, whose support is largely the reason that there is a Cardinal Edwin O'Brien today.

One symbolic gesture that you might have missed during the Consistory at which the new Cardinals were created, occurred immediately after Pope Benedict presented each of us with the red berretta and Cardinal's ring. He handed us a scroll assigning each of us a title to a significant church in Rome, thus appointing us figurative pastors within the diocese of Rome. This relates to the early days of the Church in Rome when the clergy elected their own bishop. So, as putative pastor of the Church of San Sebastiano al Palatino, I am now qualified as a member of the Roman clergy to vote in the next papal election.

I have dwelt on this seemingly incidental gesture to suggest the reason for my Thanksgiving today. The Cardinalate, in creating a deeper bond between me and the Church of Rome, offers me a moment to thank God for the many graces I have received for almost 73 years as a member, however unworthy, of Christ's One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Rome. She has been a Mother to me in every sense, and nothing I have done or will ever hope to do, will adequately repay her.

From the time of Peter and to this present day, she is a Church of sinners: a fact which we admit at the beginning of every Mass, which the confessionals announce in

every Catholic church, and of which today's headlines not infrequently remind us.

A Church very human, but divinely empowered as well.

This dual human-divine identity of our Church is called a mystery – as described in our Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Christ himself embodied this human-divine mystery in His own physical body – the body that Peter, James and John experienced so indelibly during the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor.

But the Risen Christ also embodies this human-divine mystery, now in His mystical body, His Church. The Church is very, very human-centered. Indeed, I would posit that there is no institution in the world, from time immemorial, that is more involved, more invested and immersed in the needs of all humanity than is our Catholic Church.

In contrast to this passionate respect for humanity and the dignity of every human life, the Church, in her very essence, is a divine institution. Indeed, her universal symbol is a man tortured and dying, and the instrument of His death – the cross – is the universal symbol of her faith. For us as Catholics, she exalts martyrdom, she encourages and exhorts it when the most precious gifts from God are at stake.

Her teachings are often hard when the world would have it easy. Hers is a voice that speaks of right not only when the world is right, but a Gospel voice that courageously, consistently, but humbly, speaks of right when the world is wrong. It is a Church that in every age must challenge the culture's conscience.

Just two months ago, Pope Benedict spoke to the bishops of our region regarding governmental intrusion into the rights of religious freedom in America:

“ Of particular concern are certain attempts being made to limit that most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion ... (and) concerted efforts ... to deny this right of conscientious objection with regard to cooperation in intrinsically evil practices.”

Nearly four-and-a-half years ago in my installation homily in this same Cathedral, I

laid before each of us the challenge of defending more robustly and vigorously the first of all human rights – religious freedom, not just the right to worship, but the right to live out the moral convictions that flow from our faith – and without government interference or the mandate that now threatens our Church’s institutions. Much is at stake at this moment of our history, and our solidarity and perseverance will be essential in the months and years to come.

One matter requiring such solidarity and perseverance calls to mind the Holy Father’s charge to our American bishops in Washington in April 2008: “It is your task to proclaim boldly the arguments from faith and reason in favor of the institution of marriage understood as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman, open to the transmission of life.” To which all I can say is, “We’re doing our best, Holy Father, and we will not give up the effort! We will not give up the effort!”

On that first October day in 2007 – my first as Archbishop, I thought ours would be a permanent marriage in what I believed would be my final episcopal assignment. And despite a few inevitable ups and downs we’ve had a good life together. I am proud of what we have accomplished in seeking a secure future for our Catholic school system and beginning a process to do the same for our parishes. We challenged our young people to be radically generous in offering their lives to Christ, and we extended a hand to those who have drifted from the Church. And whether standing up for pro-life pregnancy centers, working for stricter regulations over abortion clinics, advocating for just immigration reform or meeting the needs of the poor in our Archdiocese, we remained steadfast and consistent in our defense of the dignity of every human person.

Surely, none of this did I do alone. Though I am not certain how long I will remain the leader of this Archdiocese, I want to take this opportunity publicly to thank those who have made my years here among the most gratifying of my life. My auxiliary bishops, Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski and Bishop Denis J. Madden, and our Vicar General, Monsignor Richard Woy, as well as the entire staff at the Catholic Center – they are among the hardest working people in this entire Archdiocese and their work goes largely unnoticed. I am deeply grateful to the generous and faithful priests, deacons, consecrated religious and all who work in our parishes and institutions – for their Christian witness and unwavering support of the Church and

the people we serve. And I am ever grateful to the faithful of the Archdiocese for your warm welcome of me and your continued support and faith-filled example. Though I prepare to take leave of you, know of my deep affection and continued prayers for you and for this outstanding local Church, the Premier Church of Baltimore.

And may each of you, beloved sisters and brothers in Faith join me each day, in thanking God as we do in this and every Eucharist for His gift to us in Christ's One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Rome.