



NAPA INSTITUTE

Reasons for Hope: The Age of the Catholic Apostolate*

Mark C. Rohlena
President, Napa Institute

Good evening. Danielle and I are overjoyed to be back with you, our dear friends in Colorado Springs. It's a humbling thing and a tall order to be here on this 15th anniversary for the Chapter. It is great to have Bishop Golka here, as well as Stephen Henley and representatives from Denver and the National Legatus Board.

We have such incredible memories from our time here, and as part of this group. I think we always had a little baby in tow who would make the rounds to different couples throughout the night. Those little ones have grown up. Our 4th child, Genevieve, is now 14 and Leo is 11.

The Springs also has a special place in our hearts in a way relevant to the topic tonight: **Reasons for Hope: The Age of the Catholic Apostolate**

Our time at Catholic Charities here was a turning point for our family – we moved into the apostolate world in a very intentional way and have never been the same since.

In the 14 years since we made that leap, we have seen the work of the Church from many different angles –

- Within Diocesan structures;
- At the national level;
- In an educational apostolate;
- And now from the perspective of the Napa Institute, which is in many ways *an apostolate to apostolates*.

When considering how long to speak tonight, I received the guidelines from Martin, which were very helpful. But when giving a talk, a little story is always in the back of my mind. It's a story about the pastor of a very poor Irish parish, who had been telling his flock one Sunday that there was a homily to be found in every blade of grass...The following day, as the priest was cutting his own grass around the rectory, a parishioner who was passing by called out with great enthusiasm:

“That’s right, Father. Keep ‘em short.”

So, since we are with old friends, I want to allow plenty of time for questions and dialogue on how the Age of the Apostolate is visible in your work and lives.

I don't want to miss the chance to learn from you and your experiences because I know you will enrich my daily work.



NAPA INSTITUTE

To give you a roadmap, we are going to touch on just 3 themes:

1. What an apostolate—particularly a lay apostolate—is;
2. Why the Church and society desperately need them; and
3. How each one of us can foster, support, and participate fully in this new Age of the Apostolate.

The Apostolate

First, it is a great sign of the power of the apostolate that we gather under the umbrella of Legatus. Danielle and I have been members since 2011. Legatus is one of those powerful apostolates in the constellation of groups building up the kingdom.

Napa's founder, Tim Busch, has helped to start more chapters than most over the years, and we honored Tom Monaghan in our annual Faith and Business Conference in New York City last October.

We are grateful for Tom's witness in inspiring other lay apostolates to begin and grow over the years, as his work in helping to form business leaders has made a huge impact.

We live in a time of great disruption. The old frameworks of culture, society, and even religion are being tested—some are crumbling.

But amid this disruption, we have tremendous reasons for hope.

In fact, I believe we are standing at the threshold of a great renewal—one that will come not only through our clergy and religious, but through the rise of well-formed, faithful, and courageous lay apostolates.

The role of the Catholic lay apostolate is not theoretical. It is also not optional.

It is *essential*—for the future of the Church, for the future of this country, and for the healing of a deeply wounded world.

But let's take a moment to define terms. You may not hear about lay apostolates much in your daily lives. But even if you do, what exactly are we talking about?

The Catholic lay apostolate is, at its core, a response to the Great Commission—to go forth and make disciples of all nations. We do not merely inherit a passive faith; we are entrusted with a *dynamic mission*.

The work of the apostolate is rooted in baptism and the universal call to holiness. We each participate in an individual apostolate by virtue of living our lives and giving witness where we are *and* with those put in our orbit in our families, schools, workplaces and routines.



NAPA INSTITUTE

These individual apostolates of the baptized are absolutely vital and should not be ignored since most people are active in this way more than any other. If I emphasize group apostolates a bit more tonight, I do not mean to diminish the importance of the call of each individual.

But there are also groups and associations through which we can take the good news and help to transform part of the world around us in specific ways.

In St. Paul's letter to the Romans (12:6-8), we see the roots of this idea take shape. He writes:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Vatican II helped to define a number of aspects of this kind of work, making clear that we are all obligated to contribute in our own way to the building up of the Kingdom.

This is not work that can be done from the sidelines. You have already been recruited and are in the starting lineup.

In the document *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (no. 19), the Council Fathers declare:

There is a great variety of associations in the apostolate. Some set before themselves the broad apostolic purpose of the Church; others aim to evangelize and sanctify in a special way. Some purpose to infuse a Christian spirit into the temporal order; others bear witness to Christ in a special way through works of mercy and charity.

The Council goes on to emphasize that these efforts only bear fruit to the extent the faithful are precisely that – ***faithful*** - to the goals of the Church and living in the spirit of our Christian witness.

Of course, those apostolates that focus on faith within the structures of the Church, building up the Church itself, or connecting most directly to the sacraments, are given a primary place.

But what may not be visible to everybody, I get a chance to witness on a daily basis. Napa's mission is to "empower Catholic leaders to renew the Church and transform the culture." The United States, alone, has over 4100 lay apostolates, many led by amazing leaders.

Our tax advantages and commitment to giving provide us a leg-up over many other parts of the world. But each of these groups is trying in their own way to build up the Body of Christ, to strengthen its members, and to reach those who need the healing balm of Jesus Christ.

We interact with hundreds of these groups every year.

From our vantage point at the Napa Institute, the Holy Spirit has amassed an incredible force that is already making great strides at renewal. If we can remain united, giving the devil no quarter to tear us down or apart, then we have all we need to overwhelm the growing darkness.



NAPA INSTITUTE

If we have eyes to see, there are many reasons for hope.

Why the Church and Society Need Lay Apostolates

That brings me to the second thought for the evening - the Church and society are in desperate need of this new Age of the Apostolate.

Look at the world around you.

We live in a society that prizes secularism, individualism, and material prosperity, often at the expense of moral clarity and eternal truth.

We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that we still live at the height of Christian influence on culture. More realistically, we live closer to the dynamics of early apostolic times, where our modes and methods must recognize the growing distance between God and those he loves.

This is a huge challenge, but also a great opportunity.

In his excellent—and short—treatise on the times in which the Church lives and operates, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, Msgr. James Shea describes our reality well. He notes that it is critical, as a first step, to recognize the nature of the age in which we live.

The distinctions he draws are critical for our work.

A Christendom reality is one in which the basic beliefs of Christianity are not only known but largely assumed. There is influence across society which are understood and honored.

In an apostolic age, conversely, these short-hands in communicating truth and spreading the Gospel are withered or entirely absent.

In such a time, we must resemble the early Church to be effective—often poor and nimble, on fire, seemingly small, but confident.

Msgr. Shea outlines how we can make great strides for Christ in times such as these. Among the recommendations is to raise up apostolic leaders who are serious about their work and don't view their calling as a sidelight or only inwardly focused.

We require a generation of leaders who are not merely nostalgic, but missionary.

We sometimes have to put aside our grand visions of perfectly-executed plans in favor of meeting those we encounter with the beauty and truth of the faith in ways that they can hear and understand it.

And that can get kind of messy.



NAPA INSTITUTE

We must always look for chances to go deeper. But if we go from zero to 120 miles per hour with those still uncomfortable with even getting in the car, all we may get is a frustrated mess to clean when our passengers get car sick.

It's like the story of the young and very learned priest who was a tremendous student of theology. He was sent as a parochial vicar to a mountain village of very simple, forthright people. His new flock organized a generous reception to greet him and he felt it would be right to share a few words.

He began in a grand fashion: "Brethren, I am sent to minister to all of you. I am here with my hermeneutics and my homiletics, with exegesis and apologetics."

An elderly woman seated near him didn't miss a beat, and quickly exclaimed: "Don't worry, father. I am here with my diabetes, my gout, and my rheumatoid arthritis, but the village doctor is really magnificent!"

And so, we have to realize that in this New Apostolic Moment, there is a lot of foundation to lay to invite others into a deeper love of Christ. We give up nothing of the truth, but have to build relationships that can support even the yoke which is easy and burden that is light.

Even with those already in the pews, we fight for the souls and attention of people answering many masters in their lives. We are St. Paul at the Areopagus more often than we think – trying to tell the Greeks worshiping many Gods about the "Unknown God" who puts the others under his feet."

We will need to follow the model of Jesus with the woman at the well, recognizing that she had five husbands, and the one she has now is not her husband. Of course, this reference is not just about this transformed woman's personal life. But it is also about the Samaritan worship of their numerous gods, and the fact that they worshiped the one true God as a sort of hedge for their own salvation.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was a comfortable back-up plan. Practically speaking, how many of us live in precisely the same way?

So, we are in invitation mode. Moving people through a painstaking process. There are no silver bullets here.

We have to be ready to enter into this kind of "apostolic endurance" that undergirds all we do. To sit with, walk with, stand by, and stick to, those we seek to reach – for their good and our own - because the seeds of our salvation are found in these moments and people too.

I think we have a Pope who understands this.

A true missionary whose perspective about reaching people with the Gospel was forged in the small unobserved moments in little villages and towns, often with people of profound faith but not much else.



NAPA INSTITUTE

To carry this work forward, to innovate, and operate in ways closest to the needs, the Church needs faithful lay apostolates more than ever. We've discussed that each one of us has been "drafted," if you will, into this dynamic by virtue of our baptism.

And our clergy cannot be everywhere. They are shepherds, sacramental ministers, and spiritual fathers—but the marketplace, the university, the courtroom, the movie studio—those are places dominated by the laity. This is our work to shape and lead, within the mind and heart of the Church's mission and in union with our Church leaders.

If we want the world to change, we can't just complain about bad laws or vulgar entertainment. We need well-formed government leaders who get it and fight for truth, as well as artists who love beauty and want to bring it to all they meet. We were incredibly happy to host our first ever Napa Institute Arts Festival just last month, where many of these artists joined us to deepen their faith and network to create for the creator.

The Church is not just a fortress to be defended from within, though we must do that too. But She is a missionary body to be launched into the world.

And that launch depends on us – on the lay faithful - answering God's call to the apostolic life.

Receptivity to what we have to offer depends in part on whether people can see the Gospel truly lived by lay Catholics.

And Lay apostolates can help in giving flesh to doctrine.

The United States is in the middle of a profound identity crisis. We are divided, polarized, addicted, anxious, and morally adrift. But we are not beyond hope.

Beyond our borders, the need is even more urgent. Christians are persecuted, secular ideologies dominate global institutions, and the moral relativism that plagues the West is now exported to every continent.

We need apostolates that help restore the sight of those we encounter. A restoration of vision to see clearly the dignity of the human person in healthcare, business, and education.

We need apostolates that defend life, serve the poor, heal families, support parents, and protect the vulnerable.

We need apostolates that form leaders, restore the arts, and shape the next generation of saints.

And many of these have been formed and are increasing in number. – we've already mentioned Legatus and Napa, but:

- Think of lay-led campus ministry transforming secular universities from the inside as FOCUS does.



NAPA INSTITUTE

- There are groups working to support priests and religious in their vocations – we have leaned heavily into this with our Shepherd Circle program and the Priest podcast where priests interview other priests to give insight to clergy and laypeople alike. There are many other great groups in this space too.
- Apostolates that defend life and support women and families have grown in number;
- As have groups that serve those most in need and demonstrate the Church's longstanding support of those in peril or serious want;
- Think of Catholic lawyers defending conscience rights and religious freedom, like Martin Nussbaum in this Chapter, or the St. Thomas More Society, and Becket Fund;
- Or faith-informed think tanks shaping public policy, like the Ethics and Public Policy Center.
- We have broad-reaching efforts like the Knights of Columbus that are active in many areas.
- And so many more.

This is not about retreating from the public square and worrying only about internal matters. It's about marching into that square with confidence and clarity because we do the work of Jesus and His Church and that work has power.

Public policy matters, but politics is always downstream of where the culture is. America and the world don't just need more policy. They need a firm foundation that can only come from More Witness. More love. More courage. More truth.

And that is what lay apostolates provide in a world starving for authentic connection and transformative encounters with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In many parts of the world, lay apostolates are the *only* Catholic presence that survives under persecution. They are mobile, adaptive, and often underground. And yet they endure. Why? Because love endures. Because truth endures.

The world needs these witnesses. It needs a Christian presence in every profession, every country, every level of society.

The laity can bring forth the Church's love and truth where it is needed most.



NAPA INSTITUTE

We must remember that the Catholic Church is the most global and at the same time most grassroots institution in human history. And its future will be shaped not just in Rome—though I am pretty excited about Pope Leo - but in the everyday witness of lay Catholics everywhere.

One challenge for us is to recognize how the table is set before us. We often get this wrong, but gaining situational awareness is critical. We are in the middle of developing our new strategic plan at Napa Institute, so understanding the landscape is top-of-mind for us.

At the advent of the new millennium, St. John Paul II wrote:

If we look at today's world, we are struck by many negative factors that can lead to pessimism. But this feeling is unjustified: we have faith in God our Father and Lord, in his goodness and mercy.

As the third millennium of the redemption draws near, God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs.¹

I mean, he was crazy right?

For close to a decade now, I have tried to make sense of how St. John Paul II could say these words and repeat them often.²

I think there is some aspect of his perspective that we often miss.

Mention of spring recalls pleasant scenes of green grass, flowers in bloom, and the coming to life of the once-barren countryside.

How is it possible that John Paul looked at the state of humanity and saw the first signs of spring when the evidence of a cold, dead winter still surrounded so much of the world? Even with the hope that came from the collapse of evil regimes so intertwined with the life of this great saint, the West was still clearly falling prey to the ideologies at the heart of that century's terror.

As his pontificate continued, the scene only worsened from a purely human perspective. Today, these toxic ideas seem to have free rein in society – with maybe a slight return to some sanity here or there.

However, to any person familiar with life on a farm, springtime is far from a passive experience of God's beauty.

This season is one of anticipation, hard work, and trust. Fields are painstakingly prepared for planting, seeds carefully placed, cultivated, and fertilized. New animals are born and nurtured toward productivity for some unknown future. Farmers agonize over irrigation and feel acutely the unpredictable twists of nature when rains fail to descend or come too quickly through violent and destructive storms.

All this labor is rooted in a leap of faith. The farmer does his part in the long heat of the day with no guarantee of a harvest in the fall.



NAPA INSTITUTE

No, St. John Paul II was far from naïve.

He saw more clearly than most that the spiritual springtime is not only one of leisure but of labor.

The Christian is called to roll up his sleeves to till and prepare the ground of the human heart for the harvest of salvation that God intends for each one of us.

The call is ancient— “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19)—but the moment is one of profound potential.

Never since the early days of Christianity have so many been in need of the balm of the Gospel message and the person of Jesus Christ. The level of brokenness, loss of understanding about what the human person is made for, and the reign of diabolical counterfeits that sap purpose and joy are at a level the world has never known.

Into this bleak landscape the Christian is called to toil with joy. And toil in anticipation of a harvest so abundant that Jesus pleads for his disciples to pray for more laborers to make certain it can be gathered (Mt. 9:37).

In short friends, it’s time for us to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

How each one of us can fully participate in and support the Age of the Apostolate

And so we reach our final thought for tonight – that each one of us is called to fully participate in this new Age of the Apostolate which is upon us.

We have talked about the theology. But practically speaking, how do we engage?

It is very fitting that we meet on the Feast of the Transfiguration. Think about Peter, James, and John up on Mt. Tabor with Our Lord – seeing Moses and Elijah appear and witnessing Jesus’ glory pierce his human form.

What would you do if you were there?

Probably, we’d be a lot like Peter, stumbling for ideas and words and seeking to stay in that moment for as long as we possibly can.

Can we blame him?

But the key is right in front of us. We must ascend the mountain of the Lord when he invites us. We must make ready the soil of our hearts so that we can—like little children—see Jesus for who He really is when He is revealed to us.



NAPA INSTITUTE

And though we, like Peter, will need to go out from that comfortable place into the apostolates we serve, we must continue to return to the feet of Our Lord for wisdom and strength. We have to recognize that people are watching us more than listening to what we say and stay firmly rooted.

Our witness in action can be a powerful testament for or against us and our work. We are called to live within the very life of the Trinity, which is charity – to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as an extension of that love.

But Charity must be cultivated, and in very particular ways. As *Lumen Gentium* (no. 42) proclaims:

[I]f charity is to grow and fructify in the soul like a good seed, each of the faithful must willingly hear the word of God and carry out his will with deeds, with the help of his grace; he must frequently partake of the sacraments, chiefly the Eucharist, and take part in the liturgy; he must constantly apply himself to prayer, self-denial, active brotherly service and the practice of all the virtues.

We can't choose to live a "mostly" Christian life. We can't decide that we will do bold things in one area and treat people poorly in another, or accept deeply imbedded sin in our lives without trying to improve.

You won't be surprised by now that it reminds me of a quick story. Dozens of children were lined up for lunch in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school run by Dominican sisters.

At the head of the table was a large pile of apples. The Dominican sister overseeing the cafeteria made a note and posted it on the apple tray: "Take only ONE. God is watching."

Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. Here, a clever child had taken it upon himself to write a note in big bold letters: "Take all you want. God is watching the apples."

So we can't expect to show a shiny face to the world while we constantly have our hands in the cookie jar of persistent sinfulness or neglect of our relationship with God. We have to keep trying to improve and grow closer to Him so that we become capable of growing closer to others.

And there is nothing novel about how we do that, as *Lumen Gentium* makes clear. There is also nothing surprising about the fact that the devil wants to distract and destroy this work.

One item we created recently is the [Litany of the Catholic Apostolate Leader](#). We are happy to get copies of this to you free of charge if helpful in your work. It is a prayer intended to keep our minds fixed on the highest things:

- Where there is territorialism – bringing unity;
- Where there is a desire for personal aggrandizement – offering humility and submission to God;



NAPA INSTITUTE

Where we think we have all the answers, recognizing the contributions of others and that this is God's work, etc.

One other challenge to living out our calling to the apostolate that should be on our mind is that the spirit of this age has made itself very comfortable even in our own Church. This was a topic in our recent Summer Conference. That spirit of the age wants to convince us that we can do what is asked of us within relaxed confines. That we can be detached just enough to get the job done.

We want maximum impact without giving ourselves over fully – to find and fire silver bullets from the comfort of our living rooms far from the battlefield front. But that's not what we are called to. Jesus made clear that we must suffer as he suffered. And we know that by entering into His suffering we become capable of things we never thought possible.

We don't have to go looking, but we do have to see that the Church is best renewed when our sacrifices are recognized to have great value, and are not resisted, but united to His.

This is **high adventure** – the most compelling of stories to step into. But no great adventure comes without accepting the moment of conflict.

We are reminded of St. Paul's *Second Letter to the Corinthians* (4:7-11), where he writes:

Brothers and sisters: We hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

Or, as St. Thomas More said, we can't get to heaven on featherbeds.

This is certainly true as we answer the call to the apostolic life. Jesus doesn't want just a part of us; He wants **EVERY** part of us. He wants our entire abandonment to His will, full and unreserved. Even the great saints struggled their entire lives to reach that state, but we must pray for that abandonment as often as we can. And God will honor our desire and effort.

Finally, just a quick note about one ingredient that has everything to do with our ability to follow God's call – JOY. Joy is essential for our witness in whatever setting He is places us. St. John of the Cross wrote: "The soul of the one who serves God always swims in joy, always keeps holiday, and is always in the mood for singing."

Joy should be one of the first things people notice about us. In an age filled with snark, mean-spiritedness, and a hopeless outlook on life, joy is attractive and compelling. Now, this is no artificial bubbly-ness. It is a mark of the Christian in love with Jesus Christ, ready to live his life in tune with God's high calling.



NAPA INSTITUTE

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 2500) notes that “[t]he practice of goodness is accompanied by spontaneous spiritual joy and moral beauty. Likewise, truth carries with it the joy and splendor of spiritual beauty. Truth is beautiful in itself.”

“Lord, deliver me from sour-faced saints,” St Teresa of Avila once remarked.

Christians have often faced dire circumstances and dark times. But we are compelling witnesses when we are filled with hope and joy even in the face of adversity. You will remember that the first Apostolic Age had a lot of powerful enemies and horrific moments.

But even as we start to see more clearly those challenges in this New Apostolic Age, we are meant to approach the work ahead of us with joy, to draw others into the beauty of God’s plan for each soul and the world. We are capable of preserving this necessary balance of sober assessment and joy-filled witness.

Conclusion

Well, I am going to bring my remarks to a close so we can dialogue a bit. I do want to note that we have our Eucharistic Procession from St. Patrick’s Cathedral through midtown Manhattan coming up on October 14 – Cardinal O’Malley and Cardinal Dolan will join us, along with Cardinal Morengo who is the youngest Cardinal in the world, I believe. Fr. Ambrose Criste from the Norbertines will give a reflection as well. Obviously, there is no cost to join that witness moment.

The next day we have our annual Faith and Business Conference in New York City on artificial intelligence.

For detail about these events and all we have going on, check out napa-institute.org.

I know there are amazing things going on through the people in this room, and I look forward to hearing more about those. But let’s end on a note of certainty:

- This is a time for saints.
- For apostles.
- For lay missionaries.
- For joyful warriors.
- For deeply faithful men and women who love the Church and are ready to serve.

We are not called to be spectators in salvation history. So tonight, I leave you with these questions:

- What is the individual and/or group apostolate to which you are being called?
- What bold mission is God asking of you in that work?
- And how can we unite our efforts to bring in the harvest that Our Savior foretold?

Thank you and may God prosper the good work of your hands.

**Taken from a talk given to the Colorado Springs Legatus Chapter, August 6, 2025*



NAPA INSTITUTE

¹St. John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Missio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), 86, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

² After coming to these thoughts in contemplation on St. John Paul II's springtime nearly a decade ago and writing and speaking about them, I later found the reflections of Thomas D. Williams in *First Things* on the same subject, which he authored in 2009 (www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2009/04/the-springtime-of-john-paul-ii). Though not the source of my own thoughts, Father Williams touches on similar points and his reflections are worth reading in full. No doubt others have also come to similar insights as we have, though I have made no attempt to perform an exhaustive search.