

When I returned to the Catholic Church in 1985, I was what became known as a JPII Catholic. I was excited by the renewal of our ancient faith in the modern era. I saw in Pope John Paul II a great figure with the message from Jesus that would change the world, if only it was presented in a winsome, attractive way to a world needing it desperately. And that attitude of immanent breakthrough stayed with me through the seminary and my first years as a priest. I'm still excited by the faith and priesthood but looking back I think this was a fundamental misreading of the signs of the times.

“[A]lthough you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the child-like . . . learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart.” In my homily I want to return to the theme of what it means to be a Disciple of Jesus -- today. In particular, I want to look at what I have seen parents of my own generation assume about the faith and how it can be lived out in these times.

Here's what I see as a great flaw in American Catholicism:

American Catholic parents believe that their children, whom they love very much, can be both authentically Catholic and successful in the world. This dream is very American. But I believe it is a delusion.

On the one hand parents are very worried that their kids are falling away from the faith (and many – most -- are). They want their children to be deeply Catholic.

But at the same time parents want their children to be as successful as they are – or more successful! They want their children to get into the right high school, college, internship. They want them to vacation at the right places, get the right degree, enter the right career, and earn the same money that they earn – or more. And I'm not mocking this desire. It's perfectly natural.

But I'm afraid it's also a serious misreading of the signs of the times in 21st century America to think we can have both of these things. It's really rare and difficult today to be very Catholic and very successful

in the world at the same time. On one level these two ideals are never really compatible. Jesus warns us, you cannot worship both God and Mammon. But for my generation, worldly success and our faith wasn't such a contradiction. The Catholic faith was more acceptable to those in the professions and at the top of society when we were young.

I received a full-ride fellowship to a great graduate program even though my professor didn't think much of religion – and I got into an awkward argument with him about abortion at a social function. But there was more acceptance of faith back then, even in academia.

Today, if people knew what I believed, I wouldn't get that fellowship. If I had a tenured position I could probably work until I retired if I kept my mouth shut. But I'd certainly never be hired by a university today.

Times have changed. Have we come to grips with that? The paths to power, wealth, and success always have gatekeepers. There are people and institutions that control access to them. And these gatekeepers have a whole different way of looking at the world than

those with a faith perspective. And to voice Catholic beliefs and moral views among them is usually an obstacle to the top.

This has two consequences for the faith of young people today. First, as I said, there's a different culture among those they need to impress to get ahead, and they know it. This creates temptations even for faithful kids. What will I say? What will I hide? But we also need to realize that everyone under the age of, say, 35, has been immersed all their life in this culture that is toxic to serious Catholicism. And the very schools, businesses, networks we push on them as steppingstones to the success we want for our kids are also the places most steeped in ideas hostile to the Catholic worldview.

Let's go back to the Gospel today. When we hear Jesus speak of the child-like, the meek and humble of heart we can picture literal children, cute and lovable. But He means to include all the "little ones" of society, including adults who are not learned, not members of the successful classes, the people who labor. The people who have less

than we have. For His audience the surprising twist to Jesus' words here is that He is saying that these kinds of people are His people – not the learned, wise, successful in the ways of the world.

So, if that's true, then what does it mean to want our children to be more successful than we are? What if it's not possible anymore to be both successful and Catholic? What if there is now only a choice to be made between the two? The Catholic Church began as a community of the poor, the ignorant, the sick, the ugly, the outcasts – the little ones. And now we're going back there. That is how I read the signs of the times we live in.

You young people, what will you choose if that, as I say, is the choice before you, the faith with obscurity and lack of material comforts; or leaving the faith and finding broad social acceptance and perhaps significant success in the world? Parents, what about you? If you could only choose one for your children which would it be (honestly) – a strong faith, or social and financial success? You don't

have the power to make that choice for them by yourselves – the culture is so strong that it will often take your kids no matter what your sacrifice or decision. But I'm talking about your desires and how you choose and reinforce priorities in your, and your children's, lives.

Some of you parents were also JPII Catholics, who became excited at some point in your lives by Catholicism and its truth and beauty. And you were blessed by this grace and discovery. This faith in Jesus Christ really is true and beautiful, and worth our lives. But here we are in the times we live in. It hasn't turned out as we thought. It seems more like an age of struggle to persevere and preserve the faith, than a time of spiritual expansion. But we still have a choice to make, as always -- Christ or the world? One blessing of these times is that there should be less danger than in past eras in America that we will delude ourselves into thinking we can have both.