

Nothing More Beautiful
Year III, The Beauty of Communion
Encounter 2, “The Church We Believe in is Holy”

Presentation Notes

St. Joseph’s Basilica, Edmonton, December 9, 2010

Agnes Bedard

Your Grace, I am humbled. My sister said, In other words, you can lie. But I won’t – it’s too hard at my age.

...and Jesus said to me; ‘be not afraid, I go before you always, come follow me and I will give you rest.

It was August 2004, Tuesday morning, in a hotel, I’m on a cot. My two older, elder sisters were on the beds, Joan Thielen from this Basilica parish and my sister Shirley Valentine, from Calgary. We were in a hotel in one of Canada’s larger cities at the 2004 National convention of the Catholic Women’s League of Canada. I was awake with a serious problem; it was Tuesday Morning and Wednesday afternoon during the Celebration of the Eucharist I was to be installed as the new National President and I knew I could not do it. Honestly, I didn’t have the knowledge, I didn’t want the stress, I was too busy, I wasn’t holy enough, I was and am a procrastinator, I hate deadlines, I was frightened, I was scared and I knew I couldn’t do it. And Jesus said, ‘be not afraid, I go before you always, come follow me and I will give you rest.”

This is the story of my spiritual journey, and for a brief time tonight you and I will journey together. You have come to pray and be fed, and I have come to share and be fed. And I’m a little afraid, but because I have told, be not afraid, I will try not to be. When Archbishop Smith asked me to do this, I didn’t even pause – well, maybe I paused a bit. But Jesus says, “Be not afraid, I am there with you all the time.” So there must be something that God wants me to say to you tonight, to one of you, so here I am. So please, that one of you, listen carefully!

I lived in southern Alberta. I was the fifth of six girls in a farming family. I lived at Allerston. There was a post office and a church and a church hall and a graveyard – that was it. My mother had a book. It contained pictures and stories of our family, births and celebrations and accomplishments, of my oldest sister Joan Marie and then sister number 2, Shirley Anne, then sister number 3, Monica Agnes and Stephanie Frances, sister number 4. I loved that book. As a child I would look at that book often. When I was able to read, I read and reread the stories. I loved it; it was full of joy. I was not in that book. (laughter) And it really wasn’t funny to me. But I always hoped I would be in that book. No matter how many times I looked in that book, I was

never there. The book ended with my sister Monica's death in 1940, and I was born a year later to a grieving family. It was not until I was in my 40s that I realized the effect of that fact, the death of Monica Agnes on the life of Agnes Theresa, that's me. She was five when she died. She is a saint. So among other things, I am a sister of a saint, St. Monica Agnes Thielen.

My first parish was St. Isidore's at Allerston. The church was built in 1911. Matt Thielen and John Thielen, with huge families, came north to Canada, and with them they brought the faith. They built this church on the corner of my Grandfather's property. It was built on a rectangle, and around the outside of this rectangle the people planted two rows of caraganas. And between the rows of caraganas they built a path, and that path was the path for Corpus Christi processions. They were marvellous, joyous. At each corner of that graveyard there was a chapel built. And people would come with their fancy laces and linens and their candlesticks and flowers and they would convert these little sheds, these little chapels, into beautiful prayer places. And then we would sing, and we would follow the monstrance and walk ahead of it, spreading flowers. It was my first memory of joy in the church.

I played in the church. We lived so close to it. I played in it, I prayed in it, I cleaned it, I tried to play the pump organ, and I knew what was in every drawer in the sacristy and in every niche and every corner in the whole church, even in the basement – you couldn't hide anything from me. And one day I almost burned it down. I must have been about 8. We had old paper flowers – now this was the 1940s – we had paper flowers on the side altar and every Sunday they'd light the candles and I'd watch the flames flicker. And I thought, what would happen if those paper flowers got in those flames? So one day I was alone in the church – we could go in there alone in those days - and I experimented. I lit the candle and I moved the flowers into the candle and they went whoosh! I grabbed the vase off the altar and I slammed it to the floor and I stamped out the flowers, and I fled. It was a parish mystery; no one knew how that mess had happened. I remember standing in the confessional line waiting to tell Father Doiron that I had done it. But God forgave the little arsonist.

My first funeral was my Grandfather John Thielen in 1946. He was my only grandparent. I have very few memories of him, except he whittled continuous chains from caragana bows. He also spent time in the living room, rocking in his rocking chair and spitting into the open grate on the furnace. I remember when he died they had to take off the front door to get his coffin into the house. And then when he was lying in his bedroom in his coffin, my little sister Rita and I would go in and swing on the door and then we'd take a handful of holy water and go splash on Grandpa, and we'd rub it onto his face so he didn't look too wet. But we kept him well oiled for his journey.

My first nuns were the Sisters of St. Martha from Lethbridge; they stayed with us in the summer when they came to prepare the children for first communion. They were full of life and full of joy, they were happy and we loved having them with us. And it gave us a little status symbol in the parish.

Our first priest was Father Doiron; he was there for 25 years. He was loving and happy; he enjoyed spending time with us, and I can remember even when I was very young, cooking stuff for him.

My first choir. You heard me sing; I love to sing. I sing when I'm in trouble. So Bishop is just waiting for me to sing, because he'll know I'm in trouble. We sang as a family. I thought everyone sang as a family. Dad played the church organ; St. Isidore's choir would come to the house and would practise in the house in the winter because it was too cold to heat the whole church. And so my second language was Latin. I grew up singing "Kyri-e-e ..." Remember that? It was my second language. I loved to sing.

Our family said the rosary. Mom and Dad were devout Catholics. I only knew my father as a quiet man. He dealt with my sister Monica's death with quiet. Our mother kept her sadness inside. Mom loved God and the church and our family and everyone else she met. She shared her joy with everyone. In her world there were no strangers. I believe she was wholly holy. She kept a number of saints busy, finding lost 'stuff' and solving various problems. She had St. Joseph onside looking for good husbands for her daughters and also credited him with her father's peace-filled death.

She died in 1976. After her funeral we found Her Story in a book in her closet. There were stories of happy times and very sad times. She had never shared any of it with us. Her father Milton was a quiet gentle man. He left to serve in the Boer war. He came home a different man. About 1917 the marriage/family disintegrated. We blamed it on Milton, the dad. Four children (mom was 12, the oldest) were left without a mother. That was 1976 when we got that story. In August of this year, on the train from Toronto to Ottawa for the National convention, I met a man, a retired military officer who had served all over the world. And I think his experience – he felt abandoned by God. We talked about the men who come home from serving - they come home changed - and the challenges they face and the challenges their families face. Last month, November I am in the shower in the morning – I think really well in the shower - and all of a sudden I understood a little bit of what happened to Milton Erwin, my grandfather, my mother's father, the Boer War Survivor. May he rest in peace. Tonight I ask all of you to pray for our veterans, what they have seen, what they have had to do, have

enormous effects on their relationships with their families and with their God. We must pray for peace and for peace in the lives of these men and women.

I grew up with stories of heavenly interventions: an aunt who returned from the dead to clear up a scandal, and another aunt who was often sick and spoke openly of visits from a deceased priest who had been her good friend. I never doubted either of those. I just knew God was involved in our lives. I just didn't understand the Agnes – God connection.

We had a Bible. It was beautiful, large and white with lots of pictures and the family name written inside in our mom's beautiful script. I looked at the pictures, but it was always at the bottom of a stack of books. I never saw anybody read it.

For three years I boarded at Sacred Heart Convent with the FCJs, the Faithful Companions of Jesus, in Calgary. We had choir practice every morning at 6:30 before Mass. I excelled at Gregorian chant. My background in Latin helped. I loved to sing. I also was very shy. I did not like to speak in front of people. Once a week we took elocution from Leona Patterson, God bless her, and I learned how to speak. Once a week the convent boarders went to confession. Every Wednesday after we washed our hair, we would go over to the cathedral and stand in line and tell our made-up sins to the priests. The lines were often very long, and I remember old Monsignor Smith – no relation – coming out one day. He stood at the lip of the altar and he said, "All you without mortal sins, either sit down or go home." I sat down.

I became a teacher, taught in Catholic Schools in Coaldale, Whitehorse and Bow Island, and then in 1965 married Jim. I taught the first year of our marriage while Jim went to university, then I took a 16-year maternity leave to look after Gregory Arthur, Anthony Joseph, Michael James, David Matthew and Daniel Stephen. I had a miscarriage; the baby was about 45 days old. The heart was beating. I actually saw the heart beat, so I took it outside and opened the amniotic sac and I baptised it and waited until it passed away and then buried it in the ground. So I am the mother of a saint.

My sister Rita lived in Fort Saskatchewan. She was younger than I and battled cancer for 22 years. We often talked about our other sisters: Joan the oldest, who you know here because she used to lead the Mass music during the week. Joan the oldest could carve wood and play the piano, the organ, the violin and the mouth organ and paint beautiful pictures; our sister Shirley who was the next one was really clever. She read the Bible from Genesis to Revelations every year, just for something to do. Stephanie was beautiful, a great baker, and had a wonderful singing voice. Rita the youngest one was very gifted with her hands and a kind and

loving person. And one day Rita said to me during this kind of conversation, “And Agnes, you’re the funny one.” One heck of way to be identified, the funny one. Is there anywhere in the Bible that says “and Jesus laughed” or “he smiled” or “he chuckled?” Are any of the parables funny? So is being funny a gift?

I have four wonderful daughters- in-law - Terri, Shauna, Samantha and Melissa, who love me, I think – five grandchildren, Matthew, Joshua, Frances Annie and baby Alana Marie, who is due in February, and baby Gracie Agnes, who is due in April. We are so blessed.

I was brought up Catholic, as you heard. I was a Baltimore Catechism scholar; I could answer every question and write the prayers with proper punctuation. “I believe in God, comma, the Father Almighty, comma, Creator of heaven and earth, semicolon.” I could do them all that way. If we had time, I’d do them right now. I had formal religious education from Grade 8 to Grade 12, and graduated from a Catholic High School; ergo, I had successfully completed my religious education in the right religion. All I have to do is keep keeping the big rules and I will be fine.

I don’t remember any mention of the need for a personal relationship with God. Being a Catholic was safe and unchallengeable, because we were “right,” and that was that. I went to church, sang in the choir, said the rosary and felt superior. That was being Catholic. If I had thought in terms of a journey, I would have probably responded that I had arrived at the destination. Being Catholic was the destination. It was enough.

I was at a Birthright Meeting; one of the volunteers looked at me and asked me why I always looked so sad, or so tired, or so angry. I told her “life was tough.” I had five kids for heaven’s sake, and a husband. She suggested I “speak to God about it.” I told her God wasn’t going to help. He wasn’t going to intervene; he had left us to do it ourselves. A while later maybe weeks, maybe months, in desperation (a last straw sort of thing) I asked the Lord for help, in the name of Jesus, I asked Him for help. The response was immediate, a physical touch/hug/heavenly pat. It was real and it was there. God had said, “Hello, Agnes.” He was just waiting for me to ask. I had received a heavenly intervention and I wanted more.

Recently I shared this story with a friend. She told me of the day she had just had it. She needed help for one of her children and even though she had phoned and asked and begged and pleaded, no help was forthcoming. She said she sat down at the table, slammed the top with her hands and said to God “it’s your problem.” He answered instantly. The phone rang; the much needed help was offered. Just ask. We just have to ask.

I remember when the world started to crumble. I was speaking to my sister Shirley about Roe vs. Wade in the States, and remarked that I was so glad I lived in Canada because Canada would never change our abortion law because we had so many Catholics in Ottawa. I knew with absolute certainty that abortion was evil. And in a country where that was the truth then, what would happen if abortion was not evil, was not wrong? What then would be wrong?

I became involved with Birthright in 1970. In 1973, looking for help for a Birthright client, I went to St. Gerard's Parish CWL and said, "Ladies, you've got to help me." And they said, "Are you a member of the League?" And I said no, and they said "Well, you should be," so I joined, and my journey with the Catholic Women's League of Canada had begun. Throughout my journey with the League, I have worked with and been spiritually mentored by spiritual advisers. I will forever thank those who have worked with me – my bishop in Calgary for sure, Fathers Greg Coupal, Father Greg McLellan, Father Trinikins and Father Krewski and others who held my hand, and hugged me and smiled at me, affirming what I was doing.

I was on the National Executive for 17 years. Everything we did was surrounded with prayer. God's presence was a given. We had daily Mass, often the Liturgy of the Hours, spiritual reflections, prayers before and after each session. Hearts were opened to the message of Jesus. I worked with Abbott Peter Novokowski, Benedictine, Bishop Doug Crosby and Archbishop Richard Smith. I don't remember much of what they said but I know they listened carefully to us. They fed us at the moment. They listened carefully to us, supported us, nourished us and inspired us. I remember their kindness, their wisdom, their encouragement and their humour, and there is nothing more beautiful than a humorous bishop. A forever thank you on behalf of the thousands of League members for whom you have been present.

A year or so later, back in my parish, I'd been asked to be parish president. I said OK, might as well. She said God had asked – how could I say no? And so my focus became my parish, and we walked together and we studied together and we prayed together. A few years later I became Regional Chair in Calgary, and we looked at everything from the point of view of Calgary: justice and peace, Birthright, Council of Women and so on.

In 1982, I became Diocesan President. Our focus was `our ministry to God and Canada`. For two years I drove throughout the diocese, using up a pair of tires and getting a few speeding tickets, meeting women who were concerned about the world, about their homes and their families and working together.

I began attending other conventions, and during one of these conventions, I was challenged by this statement: "What the Church needs today are people who wholeheartedly embrace their faith." There it was. I questioned myself: Agnes what do you wholeheartedly embrace? Your faith? Your marriage? Motherhood? Teaching? The CWL? It changed my journey. God asks us to wholeheartedly embrace His Way. He talks to us in the Bible about being "lukewarm." That's scary. So my question to myself became: How can I wholeheartedly embrace my faith?

In 1991 I became Provincial President, so now my concerns started in the Arctic Ocean and ended at the 49th Parallel, in five dioceses. And the theme was "You go into my vineyard also." It asked us to use our gifts and go out. I travelled a lot, gave many workshops, began to sing my oral report (because they were so bad when I read them, much like this!) and met wonderful women who love their God and loved the League.

I became part of the National executive and we put together our mission statement: "A national organization of Catholic women rooted in gospel values, calling its members to holiness through service to the people of God." Words that wonderfully reflect exactly who we are as members of the League and what we are about, and who I am and what I am about.

In 2004 I was installed as National President and my theme was "Companions on the Journey." It was a song I won't sing right now – although we could sing just a bit:

*We are companions on the journey
breaking bread and sharing life,
and in the love we bear
is the hope we share
where we believe in the love of our God,
we believe in the love of our God.*

It has changed how I look at the world. It has changed who I identify as my companions, as my brothers and sisters. I was in Vancouver preparing for the National Convention when a group of us went to a store for some stuff. The others went in I stayed on the street. There was a young man there in a wheelchair, he had cerebral palsy and offered cards to me. I began to speak to him. His replies took enormous effort on his behalf. He told me he was from Edmonton, and I told him that's OK, God loves you. I didn't say that - I said God loved him. He nodded in agreement, his body jerking continuously. I then put my hand on his shoulder. His body stopped, his body stilled. I looked in his eyes, and there I saw the face of Jesus.

In 2006 I became North American Regional Chair for WUCWO. The World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, began 100 years ago in Europe and in October of this year we celebrated in Jerusalem our 100 years of work. I had the great privilege to be leader of song at the assembly; we used Gregorian Chant – which of course I excelled at - for the parts of the Mass.

Women of WUCWO from all the continents have shown me their love of God and of the Church. I will forever carry their stories of discrimination, poverty, civil wars, fear of disease in my heart, and I also will remember their faith and courage and love for their God and each other. So many of these women live with neither justice nor peace, yet their joy in the Lord, their joy in Jesus, is evident.

We are companions on this journey with all of God's people. I knew I wanted to invite parishes across Canada to connect with Catholics in other parts of the world. I started a parish to country program, inviting CWL parish councils to choose a country, any country, and learn about it, get to know them, get to know their problems, and pray for them. I gave them each a little flag and some information.

There are roughly 200 countries in the world. I kept track of only two. My own parish, St. Gerard's in Calgary, had adopted Brazil. The other one was Burkina Faso, and it was adopted by Rothsay, New Brunswick. And Ann Doucet was the pain in my neck, because I didn't have a flag for her. Every time I saw her, she'd ask, "Where's my Burkina Faso flag?" I looked all over for a Burkina Faso flag. You don't even know where it is, right? Finally I found one and I shipped it to her and I said, "That's it – no more." Now fast forward. I went to the Eucharistic Congress in Quebec. I wasn't going to go, but my sister got sick so I went with her ticket.

I was riding on a bus back to the hotel after a session and sitting right next to me was this little black man, and sitting across from me was another black guy and a Canadian Priest from New Brunswick who was speaking French with them, and I heard them say Burkina Faso. So I told the father from Canada about our program and he started talking to them in French. And then this little guy beside me turned to me and shook hands and he gave me his name. He was the Bishop from Burkina Faso. So I told him that Ann was at the conference and that I would give her this information, so that's what I did the next day. So isn't that wonderful? I come home and I am so filled with joy. My sister Shirley called me and said she's just been married for 50 years and wants to do something nice for a poor country. She said, "Do you know any poor countries?" What came into my mind was Burkina Faso. Yes, Burkina Faso! And I expected her to say, "Where's that, Agnes? I don't even know that country." But she didn't. There was

silence and then she said, “You know, I went to Burkina Faso a few years ago to immunize for Rotary.” God said, the program works.

On July the 4 of this year I was driving to Edmonton to say a few words at the National Convention of the Ukrainian Catholic Women’s League of Canada on behalf of WUCWO. I had planned on writing my speech on the way up, because they’d only given me five minutes. That’s all it takes, right? So I asked the Lord, what shall I tell these women in five minutes? And he said this. He gave me a song, and it was a beautiful song. I sang it all the way along the 200 kilometres. I knew the song. I was so smart. How could I remember all the words to this song? It was amazing. Because I hadn’t sung it very often but I certainly know it. I am so good. I sing it at 130 kmh and I sing it at 100. I’m just singing away at people as I pass them. I get to Edmonton, go to pick up my sister Joan to bring her here to Mass, and we hug hello, how are you, kiss kiss kiss. We get in the car, drive over here, we park and then I say “I want to tell you what happened. I asked the Lord for help and he gave me this song. It is ...” I couldn’t remember the song. The song was gone. I said, “Joan, I can’t remember the song and I have to use it tonight.” She said, “Relax, it will come back to you.”

So we come into Mass and we’re sitting there and I see those hymn books, and I go one at a time through Breaking Bread, and the song isn’t there. I can’t believe it – there are what, 600 songs there? So I pick up CBW III, and it’s faster because there are duplicates, right? I can’t see it anywhere. Not there. It’s nowhere. I’ve been sitting there, and I’ve missed Mass. I go over to the Ukrainian thing and they open with a prayer. They sing for 20 minutes with their prayer – almost like what’s here tonight. And all through their singing, I’m thinking, “Shut up, shut up, I’m trying to hear this song.” So I get up to speak, and there’s no song. So I tell them the story of no song and I know what God wanted me to tell them, because I had sung it so often. That part was in my head, and it was simple: Jesus came so we would be one, one in faith, and he came because he wants us to be one in him. And that was the message, and the message was for me. And that beautiful song – someday I’m going to hear it again, and maybe it will be up there, because I think He wrote that song just for me.

Jesus is our Companion and life is a journey and He invites us to walk with Him, to be light, to show His love to everyone we meet, to make a difference and continue to make that difference every day. I seek His face, I am aware of His presence and I strive to grow in holiness.

Tonight as I speak to you, the choir I direct is working hard without me. I am blessed to share my love of music with them. I believe and know every time I sing I am thanking God for his gift to me and when I sing well it gives Glory to him.

And with your permission, I know I'm probably about 20 minutes over, but ...

*Taste and see
Taste and see
The goodness of the Lord
O taste and see
Taste and see
The goodness of the Lord
Of the Lord.*

*I will bless the Lord at all times
His praises will always be on my lips
I called the Lord and he answered me
In all my troubles He set me free*

*Taste and see
Taste and see
The goodness of the Lord
O taste and see
Taste and see
The goodness of the Lord
Of the Lord.*