



Rev. Jack Conley

Solemn Novena 07-18-26

I will join the others in warmly welcoming you. It's a treat to be with you this week. Yesterday, Father Rick reminded us of the tremendous change that we are living within at these times. And how technology and artificial intelligence and all kinds of things are penetrating us. And religion, Father Rick said, is what holds us together. What allows us to get through the red skies of night and morning.

What Shakespeare called the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. But religion has to keep growing. And I was thinking when Father Richard reminded us earlier that Father Rick has been in Haiti for 35 years.

I've bounced around the country a lot. I've lived in many, many cities as a priest. Can't hold a job, I guess.

But no matter where I go, whether it's Chicago or Louisville, I was in Texas and California. I always get involved in prison ministry. I find it very fulfilling and very insightful.

I learn a lot from inmates. And I previously was in Folsom Prison in California, the maximum security division. And now a lot of the guys have tattoos.

But one dude had no images or graphics, just a couple of words. And the words were born to lose. And as I listened to him, literally burnt into his flesh, this message told me that people are distant from God not just because of evil, but because of rotten messages that we listen to.

Tapes that play between our ears that are not of God. And so today, I'd like to begin by just inviting you to a different kind of vision. To look deep within your own experience and ponder, what is God truly telling me? Because we're blasted with all kinds of information.

And a lot of it is not true. You see, the first word in Jesus' lips in Mark's gospel is to repent. And that doesn't mean to feel badly or get yourself into a guilt trip.

Penso is one of the definitions, is the word to think. And to repent means I'm willing to rethink my faith. We grow, we change, we develop.

Not just, you know, if you were a physician or an IT person, and you're not continuing your education, you're going to get fired. Same thing with religion. If you're not coming to a shrine for a novena or a retreat or your parish faith formation or Bible study, you'll drift.

Massive numbers of people are hemorrhaging out of churches today, I believe, because we haven't updated. And that's why our Holy Father keeps asking us to go deeper. 62% of American Catholics, their last faith formation is sixth grade.

You can't possibly deal with adult complex problems with an 11-year-old mentality. So thank you for coming to a novena. Thank you for your decision to keep growing in your faith.

You see, there's basically three levels or three stages that we go through. We call it pre-critical, critical, and post-critical. Pre-critical is when you're a little kid and you believe everything that daddy and mom say.

You never even question the birth of Jesus, Jesus feeding 5,000 or walking on water. And then, by the time you move into junior high or high, you begin to critically think. You begin, not taking an inventory, but you generally begin to just question your faith.

That's healthy. And then, eventually, you move into what we call post-critical thinking. And that thinking is what Jesus keeps inviting his disciples into in the Gospels.

Well, you don't limit reality to your experience. The Enlightenment said, the only thing that's real is your reason. Well, that's nonsense.

There's a world beyond what we can comprehend. There's a big world. And that's why the Gospels are so necessary for us to keep learning and keep going deeper.

I'm convinced that to really see through the eyes of God, we've gotta grow in faith. And doubt is a necessary part of that growth. I dare say, if you're not doubting at times in your life, you don't have faith.

The goal of faith is not certitude. It's to wrestle with God. Like Jacob did in Genesis 32.

And that's how we find truth. And Father Rick reminded us yesterday that we don't like to wrestle much. We're always fighting.

We're always demanding certitude. We live in a black and white world. And if you don't agree with me, not only are you wrong, but you're evil.

That's a bad approach to growing in holiness and growing in faith. We call it the binary system. Or epistemological dualisms.

That's fancy words for the twosies. And by twosies, even if you're on an airplane and the flight attendant says, do you want a drink? We say, yeah, I'd like a Pepsi. And they say, we only have Coke.

Well, that's fine for soft drinks. But if you've got a teenager with an attitude, you better find a different way. Because the world is far bigger than black and white, Democrat and Republican, them and us, right and left, we're one.

And we must continue to move together in synodality, walking together towards truth and towards what Pope Leo calls a time of love. Maybe you, well, most of you are too young, but maybe you remember a comedian by the name of Freddie Prinze. Freddie was an extraordinary young man.

He grew up in the Puerto Rican ghetto of New York, but he was funny. In fact, in high school, he used to tell jokes during lunchtime in the cafeteria. And not only kids, but teachers would cluster around because he was really good.

Eventually, he was found by a talent scout and got a job as a stand-up comic in a Manhattan club. He was a high school junior making big bucks. And then another talent scout found him there.

Got his own TV show. He had moved to Beverly Hills, bought a beautiful home for his parents. He was a multimillionaire.

And he was only 21 years old. By the time Freddie turned 23, he died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. A therapist that was working with the young comedian said the trouble with Freddie is that he could hear only negative voices.

What voice are you listening to at this time of your life? When you're hopping in the shower, folding the towels in the laundry room, when you're driving to work, is it the voice of God's unconditional love? Or is it the voice of evil, of Satan, telling you born to lose, not enough? Please don't listen to that voice. And so as we continue our novena this week, you want to hear those precious words of Paul to the church at Rome. Nothing will separate you from God's love.

Don't be so arrogant as to think that your past or your sins or your limitations are stronger than God. That's idolatry. And every single religion has its first commandment, its first law or rule.

Don't worship false gods. Don't get into that crazy, crazy voice in our culture that keeps saying more, more, more. Let God love you today, now, as you are.