

**Presentation of Lea Singh**  
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Pope Benedict has said: “There is nothing more beautiful than being a Christian.” Why did he say that? I would have expected him to say that there is nothing “better” than being a Christian. But instead, he associates beauty and Christianity.

In our culture, we are taught to think of beauty as what we see on the front pages of magazines, or in material things like beautiful cars or beautiful homes. But the Gospel calls us to dig deeper. Seeing beauty on the outside is just the most superficial way of seeing.

One of the times when these two understandings of beauty became very clear for me was in 1997, when Princess Diana and Mother Teresa died within a couple of months of each other. Princess Diana was an icon of the world’s understanding of beauty. But Mother Teresa was a witness to the words of Pope Benedict: “There is nothing more beautiful than being a Christian.” It was her life that glowed like a bright lamp with the authentic beauty of the Gospel.

It’s true that often, the beauty of the Gospel is first revealed to us through other people. Even when we pick up the Gospel and read it, often we don’t really understand its beauty until we see it lived out in the lives of other people.

For me, the beauty of the Gospel first shone out through my grandfathers. I was born Catholic, and I was introduced to the Gospel from childhood, so I grew up familiar with its stories. But as a child and even as a young adult, the Gospel itself didn’t speak as loud to me as the lives I saw lived by my grandfathers. They were both faithful Catholics who took me to mass and taught me about the faith. I looked up to them as a child because I knew they were good and also wise, and I knew that their goodness and wisdom had to do with their faithfulness to the Gospel.

One of my grandfathers is still alive, and to this day he continues to inspire me with his faith. He is a Legionary of Mary, and I am so grateful to him because I know that his prayers have interceded for me so many times in my life and helped me to stay on the right path.

I was born in Communist Czechoslovakia, and the Communists were not on good terms with Catholics. My grandfathers had both lost their careers because of their faith, and other members of my family had also suffered in various ways. So when I was eight years old, my family escaped from Czechoslovakia and came to Canada as political refugees. We were sent to Edmonton, and I grew up here and in St. Albert, going to various public and Catholic schools.

At that time, I think I took the Gospel for granted. I always had faith in God and I never doubted that the Gospel was true, but I didn’t think about it very deeply either. We went to mass on most Sundays, but I didn’t understand Christianity as something that changes our entire lives, including weekdays. My personal prayer life was quite weak during those years. In fact, I didn’t understand prayer very well at all. I thought you only prayed in order to ask God for something.

At that time I was quite ambitious. When I was deciding on high schools I went to see the guidance counselor at Archbishop Macdonald High School, and my mother tells me that to her great embarrassment I told him that I wanted to go to Harvard, and I asked if Archbishop Macdonald could prepare me for that. Well, at that time we were poor immigrants and it just seemed so ridiculous to say something like that.

Still, I did well in school and on the debate team, and in grade 11 I won a provincial scholarship to an international school in Wales, United Kingdom, called the United World College of the Atlantic. I spent two years there with international students from all over the world.

I went to mass fairly frequently (though not every Sunday, as I didn't realize it was an obligation), but again, I did not reflect that deeply on the Gospel. After high school I went to university at probably the least-known American Ivy League school, Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, and majored in international relations. After Dartmouth I was accepted into Harvard Law School, my long-time dream.

Once I got into Harvard, for a while I became quite proud of myself. My professors were some of the most powerful names in the legal world, and the name Harvard seemed to be like a secret code-word that unlocked every door. In his welcome speech, our Dean assured that from now on, our lives would be easy. The hard part was getting into Harvard, but once we were in, almost no one ever failed out of there.

But that's when things started really changing in my life in a way I had not expected. Once I settled into my nice apartment right next to the law school campus, I started feeling a little odd. This moment was supposed to be a major victory in my academic life, and yet it all felt strangely hollow and empty. My major goal had been accomplished, and well, now what? The accomplishment had not brought me the happiness, joy and fulfillment that I hoped for.

And I started to suspect that no matter what else I eventually achieved in life, I would get that same empty feeling in the end. When we chase earthly pleasures and earthly achievements for our own sake, the joy we get from them is just so little. Basically, I started thinking about the ultimate meaning of life. What is all this for?

I already suspected the answer to my question, because I knew that there was something that I had never given enough time and thought to, and yet I always believed that it was God's own word to us: the Gospel. To turn somewhere else would have been to run away from the truth – and in some ways, I had already been doing that for a long time by focusing on myself instead of paying closer attention to God. But now the time had come for me to face the truth of the Gospel, and I didn't want to turn away this time, because finally I was hungry for real meaning and for the truth. Again, I think it had to do with the prayers of my grandfather in the Czech Republic.

I had a good friend at Harvard at that time, who happened to be a very strong Catholic. She was starting a prayer group, and I decided to join it. That prayer group had a very important influence on me. We prayed together, we discussed the faith, and we chanted the Liturgy of the Hours, which I came to love and pray on my own. I started reading the

Gospel again, and I also started to read other faith writings, such as the Imitation of Christ by Thomas Kempis, which guides towards detachment from the world and a complete communion with God. Eventually I asked a priest I knew to be my spiritual advisor, and to guide my spiritual development.

There is something magnetically beautiful about the truth, and it draws us in. And once we take the Gospel seriously and read it as an account of our salvation, then just as happened to St. Paul in the Gospel, it's as if the scales fall from our eyes. Indeed, the Gospel invites us to *live in truth* – and this means, to live authentically and deeply rather than superficially. The Gospel tells us what we were made for, where we are going, and how we can get there. It tells us what is really important in life, and it invites us to live according to that.

An English poet once said: “Truth is beauty, beauty truth, that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

But that isn't exactly right. Beauty is not just truth, it's also goodness, and the Gospel shows us that. The Gospel is beautiful not only because it is true, but also because it is the Good News – because it tells us a wonderful message, that our Creator loves us so much that he died for us. The ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross is beautiful, even as it is a horrible and painful death, because it reveals the depth of our Father's love for us. And in the end, isn't love the most beautiful thing there is in the world? This love, showered upon us by our Heavenly Father, gives us great joy, hope and peace.

Well, once I started to go deeper into the faith, and to develop a relationship with Christ through real prayer, prayer where there isn't only petition but also adoration, atonement, and thanksgiving, I started to develop a sincere love for God. For the first time, an actual relationship was forming between me and my Heavenly Father, through prayer. And it did change my life.

Pope Benedict said, on the eve of World Youth Day in 2005, that being a Christian is like having wings. The Gospel sets us free in a profound way, because it sets us free to do the right thing. It tells us the truth about ourselves, and so it sets us free to live out our purpose. We can allow ourselves to be transformed, and we can work on changing the world for the better because we know what is really important, and because we have the strength to live it out through our relationship with Jesus Christ.

It was at this time that my life started taking a new direction. I had entered law school wanting to do international human rights law, but as my faith deepened and as I grew in my understanding of how the international system functioned, I realized that the United Nations and other international institutions were often not promoting the values that were becoming more and more important to me.

I wondered why it was that many organizations within the UN, which started out after WWII with an excellent document called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, were losing their way these days and trying to promote so-called “reproductive” and “sexual” rights as fundamental human rights. Why is it that even organizations like Amnesty International are now fighting for abortion as a human right around the world?

I believe it is because we need the Gospel to keep us on track. The Gospel teaches us about our human worth and dignity, and about our rights and responsibilities towards one another. But without the Gospel, we start to make the rules ourselves. And when that happens, we can get terribly confused and mistaken. Amnesty International was started by a Catholic; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was inspired largely by Christian values. But with the growing secularism of the world, there is also a growing darkness in our understanding of morality and human rights.

Today, public international law is often being used as a weapon against true human dignity. So by the time I wrote my thesis on the International Criminal Court, I was sure I didn't want to go into this field of law.

But I didn't quite know what else to do else to do. So, like many law school graduates, I ended up in the big New York law firm doing corporate law. In some ways, it was a fine life. We had long hours, to be sure. But we also had prestige and high incomes. It was easy to get used to the "high life." But by that time, I was already beyond being interested in that kind of life.

The work at the law firm was intellectually stimulating enough, but again, I was finding it very empty and hollow. I felt like I was living a split personality – on the one hand I loved to pray, read religious books and attend faith activities, but my daily work consisted of the financial restructuring of corporations, and I just didn't see a link between the two.

I started to meditate a lot on the parable of the rich young man. It felt like a sign for me at that time in my life. I felt the need to give more of myself, to serve Christ more directly, and I didn't want to walk away from God's invitation.

I finally realized that I needed to let go of my own ego and ambitions even more, and to be completely open to his will for me. I even considered the idea that maybe I was being called to the religious life, and I discerned with three wonderful orders on the East Coast. But I finally discerned that the religious life was not my calling.

On the plane home from the last religious order, I knew that God had to be calling me to something else, and I pleaded again that he would show it to me. Just then I opened a magazine and saw an article about a nonprofit organization which lobbied at the UN in New York, called Catholic Family & Human Rights Institute, or C-FAM. It was the answer to my prayer.

C-FAM would give me a chance to openly work towards the kinds of changes that I supported at the UN, to defend the Gospel vision of human dignity and to help build a culture of life. I had given up on doing that through international human rights law, but now I saw that this organization was a way to do something positive about the sad fate of the international human rights community.

By Divine Providence, they just happened to be looking for someone to take over their New York Office. So one year after I joined the law firm, I quit and became the Legal Counsel of C-FAM.

My pay went down by about two thirds, I moved down to a much smaller apartment that I shared with a roommate, and I took buses instead of private cab rides. But I had never felt happier in my life. For the first time, I really had a feeling that I was doing what I was made for by God, and more closely following the teachings of the Gospel.

But God was not finished with me yet. Very soon after starting at C-FAM, God also sent into my life a Catholic man named Jasbir, a convert from Sikhism - the man who eventually became my husband. He lived in Ottawa, so after we got to know each other I decided to move back to Canada so that we could better discern God's will for us in marriage. After much prayer, Jasbir found the job ad that would bring me to Canada: my current job as the Assistant Director of the Catholic Organization for Life and Family in Ottawa. So a year after joining C-FAM, I left New York, and a year later Jasbir and I were married – and we are now expecting our first child.

As far as my work at the Catholic Organization for Life and Family, some of you might remember us from last year, when we held a 2-day National Symposium on the Theology of the Body right here in Edmonton. That Symposium was such a success that we held a second one this past November in Quebec City, and Salt and Light Television will be airing a one-hour special on that Symposium.

COLF is a national organization that is co-founded and co-sponsored by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus. The Chairman of our Board of Directors is Bishop Jean Gagnon, of the Gaspé Diocese.

COLF's mission is to build a culture of life and a civilization of love by promoting respect for human life and dignity and the essential role of the family. Our mission, like that of many pro-life organizations, is motivated by the beauty of the Gospel. One of the documents that expresses the foundation of our work is *Evangelium Vitae*, the encyclical letter of John Paul II which translates as "The Gospel of Life." The Gospel teaches us about the incredible dignity and value of human life as created and beloved by God and destined for a future with him in Heaven.

It is because of this Gospel teaching that we know human life is sacred from conception until natural death. Without this teaching, it is easy to see human life as having little value, and we see that all around us in our secularized society, in things like abortion, euthanasia, and the many attacks on the life of the embryo, including stem cell research and various reproductive technologies.

I feel privileged to work for COLF, because I am doing what I love. My work is a direct form of evangelization, because we produce educational documents, intervene in the public square, and in various other ways we seek to share the truth of the Gospel with our society.

I hope that my story will inspire and encourage some of you on your own life journey. But I wouldn't want you to leave here tonight thinking that to live out the Gospel, we all need to become nonprofit activists or missionaries.

It's true that the beauty of the Gospel cannot stay within its pages –we as Christians are all called to the same mission of being witnesses to the beauty of the Gospel.

Ideally, just by looking at how we live and conduct our lives, others should be able to perceive the beauty of the Gospel without ever having read a single word – because they see how the Gospel has transformed us from within. In fact, many people may only ever pick up the Gospel if we spark their interest in it through the example of our well-lived lives.

But while we have the same mission, we all fulfill it in very different ways, and often it is through our ordinary daily work, whether in the public or private sectors, whether as CEOs, teachers, taxi drivers, or stay-at-home moms. We have a chance to give witness by performing our work well, by taking opportunities to befriend colleagues and offering them a Christian perspective on things, by planting little seeds on our daily path, by praying for others we encounter along the way, by offering our daily work and our difficulties to the Lord and by being role models of Christian virtue wherever we go.

The fact is, good Catholics are needed in every single occupation, everywhere in our society. *Any* place of work, any professional or vocational calling, can be an important place to witness to the beauty of human dignity. Like Mother Theresa said, it's not about doing great things, but about doing "small things, with great love."

The main thing we are called to do is to discern the path that God has marked out for each of us. We begin that discernment not by asking "what do I want to do" but by prayer, by asking where He wants to lead us, and by quietly but actively listening. A good way to begin is by reading the Gospel.

The other important thing to keep in mind is the words that John Paul II spoke so often: do not be afraid. Sometimes we may find that God is asking us to make changes in our lives that require courage on our part. This was true in my own life as well – it was not easy to leave the secure world of the law firm with its many advantages. But my deep desire to serve Christ more directly made it easy, in the end, to find the courage to act.

In conclusion, I'd like to leave you with the words of John Paul II at World Youth Day 2000, words that have inspired me throughout my own journey:

"My dear young people....of every continent, do not be afraid to be the saints of the new millennium. Be contemplative, love prayer; be coherent with your faith and generous in the service of your Brothers and Sisters, be active members of the Church and builders of peace. To succeed in this demanding project of life, continue to listen to His word."