

**Jimmy Lai Christofideles Laici Award
National Catholic Prayer Breakfast Washington, DC,
September 14, 2021**

(Mr. Bill McGurn accepted the award on behalf of Jimmy Lai.)

Thank you, Joe. It's my great honor to accept the Christofideles Laici Award on behalf of my friend. I love Jimmy Lai. For those of you who are not familiar with him, he is a Hong Kong entrepreneur who founded two of its leading publications — Next magazine and Apple Daily. He is in prison today for a simple reason. His publications told the truth about China and Hong Kong. And though Communism comes in many flavors —Soviet, Chinese, Cuban— the one thing that unites them all is that Communism can never tolerate truth.

My relationship with Jimmy is personal. Though we are both newspaperman, and we share a love for the writings of economist Friedrich Hayek, Jimmy is also my godson— and our wives and families are close and entwined. Jimmy was received into the Catholic church just before the British returned Hong Kong to China in 1997. For many of us who lived through it, it was a dark time. Jimmy's baptism came as a sign of hope amid the gloom, like a small green shoot breaking through the concrete. Jimmy believes we were created for truth — and that it is our job to speak the truth, especially when no one else will, whatever the cost. How else could a man so willingly exchange the comfortable life of a Hong Kong multimillionaire for the prison cell of a Chinese dissident?

When he was arrested last December, his wife Teresa emailed me a photo of Jimmy in chains and handcuffs. She said the security forces were doing it to humiliate him. I told her not to worry — that the people of Hong Kong see those handcuffs and chains as badges of honor. Because every man, woman and child in Hong Kong knows that Jimmy chose those handcuffs and chains. That photo of Jimmy today hangs on the wall next to my desk, where I look at it every day when I begin work. Many people saw Jimmy's arrest coming and urged him to leave Hong Kong and to live in his apartments in Paris or Tokyo. No one would have blamed him if he had.

But let me tell you this: If you thought that was ever a possibility, you don't know Jimmy Lai. Jimmy submitted to chains and handcuffs as an act of solidarity with the thousands of fellow Hong Kongers far less famous than he is —people who did not have the choice he did and were likewise arrested. I mentioned Jimmy is my godson, and I love him. But I should also mention that his wife, Teresa, is perhaps the strongest, most faithful Catholic I have ever met. She knew when she married Jimmy that this day might come.

So here's what she tells him: Jimmy, I am your wife ... I will stand by your side ... and I will walk this path with you every step of the way. But you must pick up your cross ... you must embrace it ... and you must try to be a saint because that is what we are all called to be — even in prison. And guess what? This strong, proud man does exactly what his wife says, because each trusts the other absolutely — the way two people in a Catholic marriage should. It is a terrible, awesome, humbling thing to witness.

These days Jimmy has come to treat prison life as his own expression of the Holy Rule of St. Benedict. *Ora et labora*. Pray and work, the perfect balance. When he is not reading the classics of the faith in an effort to draw closer to God, he has a job folding paper into envelopes. He reads so much that Cardinal Zen complains that now when he goes to see Jimmy, he has to bone up on his theology first, because Jimmy has so many questions from his reading. And guess what: we are seeing the fruits of Jimmy's witness in the baptisms of some of his fellow prisoners.

So while Jimmy may be stuck in prison, his soul remains free. His is the spirit of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who once wrote: "Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul." My friends, I have gone on too long. Jimmy would want me to thank you again for remembering him. Teresa would add the only thing this big-hearted woman ever adds when people ask her what they can do to help: Pray. For as honored as Jimmy and Teresa are by the distinction you give today, they are overwhelmed and humbled by the thousands of people across the world — people they do not know and will never meet — who are praying for them. They ask only that when you hit your knees tonight to remember them to the Almighty, you also lie up in prayer the many others in Hong Kong and China who are facing the same threat as Jimmy, with the same grace and courage —but who are unknown, unnoticed, and abandoned by our world.

Let me leave you with this message: Never, ever let anyone tell you your prayers are wasted. Because there is a good man unjustly held in a prison cell on the other side of the world who would tell you that your prayers are what keeps him going. Thank you for coming this morning, thank you for listening. And thank you especially for your prayers for Jimmy Lai.