

Homily
Closing Mass
Catholic Social Ministry Gathering 2014
February 5, 2014

Bishop Richard Pates
Chair, USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace

As we bring to a close the 2014 edition of the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, I once again want to pay tribute to a prophet of our time John Carr, whose vision gave birth to this perduring initiative. We are grateful to John's USCCB successor, Jonathan Reyes, along with vital partners who keep us focused and energized for the work of social justice. The 1971 Synod of Bishops taught that justice is integral to the Gospel. And so, we are about the ministry of Evangelization.

It was last year at this time that I was here for this event. The following morning after being enthused by Cardinal O'Malley's keynote address and celebrating the closing Mass in your company, I was approached by a deacon who asked me: What did I think about Pope Benedict resigning? That was the first I heard of this astounding development. The year since has unfolded substantiating what Pope Francis has repeated often, Our God is a God of surprises.

A year later, the question surfaces: how did this once relatively obscure figure, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, capture the hearts of the World's populace so quickly and definitively in an age in which religion is often intentionally sidelined and even portrayed by some as obsolete?

The immediate response is that he is humble and unassuming yet a figure who is strongly present. People identify with his humility and are drawn into his orbit and desirous of listening to what he has to say. His witness to the incarnation reveals the human dimension of that defining mystery. A word that frequently flows in his speech is tenderness. The picture captured is that of the human Jesus who looks into the eyes of his brother and sister with kindness, mercy, respect and love giving that individual worth. Obviously, what stands out is Francis' relational perspective.

The people of the world have also come to know Pope Francis as a free man. He does not conform to long-held expectations of similar public figures or even of the Vatican. This freedom opens the way to spontaneous and bold action. One episode that has stood out in his early papacy is his action during the heightened Syrian crisis when American bombing seemed imminent. The Pope wrote to President Putin asking him to exercise persuasive influence among gathered world leaders. He then called for the most effective intervention, that of prayer and fasting. His fearless action merged with an American public which had no appetite for bombing. The Pope's timeless formula for resolving conflict remains in play: dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

The entrance of Pope Francis on the world stage has been a game changer. Our inspiration for the 2014 edition of the Social Ministry Gathering is derived from the homily at his inaugural

Mass where he stated that he wanted the Church to become “a Church that is poor and for the poor.”

Our perennial task as agents of social justice is to advocate for the protection of human life and dignity in the United States and abroad. Insofar as the Pope has identified the Church he wants, he has provided us an opportunity to exercise an examination of conscience particularly because as Americans we come from a wealthy and powerful nation. For us, what does a Church that is poor and for the poor mean? It is as disciples of Jesus that we are challenged to examine our ways and to humbly change or grow.

The desire of Pope Francis as articulated in our gathering’s theme is paradoxical and warrants reflection. As the Holy Father personally demonstrates, we continue to be called to works of justice and charity that alleviate or end material or abject poverty within the framework of each person’s total lifespan from the moment of conception to natural death.

But the Pope also calls us to implement the call as Jesus’ disciples to greater “spiritual poverty.” This means a deeper humility and dependence in God that if aligned with integrity will likely have very real consequences on the style and substance of our lives, work and ministry. How is it that as people working to end death – dealing poverty, we are also paradoxically called to another type of “poverty” that is actually healing, life-giving and restorative of our kinship with our neglected sisters and brothers?

The readings in today’s liturgy provide insight into the influence of spiritual poverty as we exercise leadership and also as we face opposition to our work and ministry.

In the reading from 2 Samuel, David struggles to arrive at more authentic leadership – humble and even remorseful rather than prideful. This perhaps speaks to us in a special way as we consider Pope Francis’ exhortation. What would an increase in servant leadership among the wealthy and powerful in our society and world look like? We in Iowa are blessed with a leader of that ilk, Larry Zimbleman, CEO of Principal Financial. In Iowa circles, he is regarded as very humble and yet highly effective as a corporate leader. Recently, he was appointed Chairman of Financial Services Roundtable an influential national, economic advisory body. When asked on MSNBC if the stockpile of cash of American Corporations should be used to expand and create jobs and affirming such by signing a pledge proffered by President Obama, “Of course,” he replied. “It’s a no brainer.” Such leadership which recognizes that the economy exists for people fulfills God’s plan and organizes material resources to serve human need.

Moreover, what would an increase in that desirable “spiritual poverty” look like in the various ways we exercise leadership in the Church? Perhaps in both Church and society we need to recover a deeper appreciation of the kinship and right relationship before God that is symbolized in both Pope Francis’ writings and today’s scripture references to the deeply caring bond between shepherds and sheep. How might it affect our ministries if each of us can demonstrate the leadership that highlights bonds of kinship and mutual responsibility rather than pridefulness or quickness to divide, label and blame others?

Recently, in my role as Chairman of the International Justice and Peace Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I was a part of a delegation of bishops from South Africa, Europe, Iceland and North America known as the coordinating committee which visited Israel and Palestine with the specific purpose of becoming familiar first-hand with that tense situation and to advocate for justice and peace for the people of the Holy Land.

Our group spent a day in Gaza. Nearly all are familiar that Gaza's 1.8 million people live in a narrow strip of land. They are the most concentrated population in the world.

Archbishop Alexis, Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Gaza, serves the Greek Orthodox Community in Gaza and by self-assertion also serves the entire population. He unabashedly said that Gaza is a "big prison." It is an open air penitentiary with conditions that mock human dignity.

My most poignant memory of Gaza, was the moment after leaving an encouraging meeting facing difficult issues and heading to the bus in enveloping dusk. There, I encountered a young man of 15 or 16 who approached me with hand extended. With soulful eyes he clutched my hand and simply said, "Goodbye." The memory haunts me as to my own responsibility of having come to know the sheep in Gaza in the particular role I have with the USCCB. As a shepherd I feel compelled to speak out and to constantly insist, with other shepherds responsible for Gaza, that the present resolution of this conflict is not working. As a matter of fact, it is intolerable.

Those of us seeking to walk this journey into greater authenticity and humility before the Lord and our brothers and sisters will be wise for the sake of perspective to consider that those who have gone before us have frequently met great opposition in direct relation to their efforts toward authentic witness. The Gospel of Mark shows us how some of those closest to Jesus turned toward cynicism in the face of his public ministry. We hear the chilling line, "And they took offense at him."

Religious and secular heroes – Mother Theresa, Archbishop Romero, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela persevered in truth and testified to the inevitable victory of humility, void of self-righteousness, which is open to sacrifice for the sake of unity and love.

We hear something of the same "offense" in the events that led to the martyrdom of Saint Agatha, whose memorial we mark in this liturgy. Among the graphic and troubling accounts of the martyrdom of the noble-born Agatha in Third Century Sicily, are those which point to the simplicity of her lifestyle and dress as causing scandal and promoting deadly offense among her persecutors. When asked why she lived the servile life of a Christian, she answered: "I am a handmaid of Christ, and that is why I bear the outward appearance of a slave, yet this is the highest nobility, to be a slave to Christ."

In these days, we have spoken much of the kinship that leads us to seek to alleviate the unnecessary and unjust suffering of others and to simplify the prideful tendencies to excess in our wealthy societies and our own lives. As we walk this journey we will be well served to be on guard for the reaction of "taking offense" ourselves at others striving for more authentic

witness. We also must be prepared to meet such “offense” from others with loving perseverance, like Jesus as we pray and struggle for greater authenticity in our witness.

Today, we are seeing very tangible evidence of downward cycles of violence, victimization, oppression and vengeance. Examples abound: the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Nigeria, also among Shia and Sunni Moslems, and in the tenor of our political discourse in the United States and not least the temptations of our own hearts.

An aspect of that “spiritual poverty” and dependence on the Lord to which Pope Francis encourages us as a poor church may be to reflect on Christ’s woundedness that opens to forgiveness, reconciliation, kinship and healing. Let us pray for this grace, and by our lives witness to the only true victory over forces that pursue incremental and ultimately total death.