



Homily
2013 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering
Washington, DC
February 10, 2013

It is a great joy for me as Chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on International Justice and Peace to join you today. Your efforts on behalf of justice are not peripheral to the mission of the Church. The 1971 Synod of Catholic Bishops boldly taught: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.” (#6). In this year of faith we put faith into action as we are fully committed at every turn to protect that which is so integral to the Gospel – Human Life and Dignity.

As I begin, I express thanks to Cardinal Sean O’Malley for launching this year’s program through his insightful and galvanizing keynote presentation. I also extend a heartfelt welcome to our new leader Jonathan Reyes, Executive Director of the USCCB Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development. Jonathan is a very worthy successor of John Carr who exercised inspired leadership for 24 years in that role.

The principal characters in today’s scripture readings – Isaiah, Paul, Simon, John and James demonstrate an attitude that speaks to us as we undertake our roles as proclaimers of God’s revelation through our work in social justice. Along with them, we sense our own unworthiness. We recognize that whatever we are able to accomplish is because of the Spirit working through us. We are truly servants of the vision derived from the penetration of God’s Word in our minds and hearts. Our sense of unworthiness leads to greater dependence in humbly allowing God to speak through us.

After a bruising election cycle, the present mood is for us is to sit back and take stock of our situation, reassess our priorities and then move forward with some hesitation. The scriptures seem providential. For what Jesus presents to the Apostles seems to defy

experience. They have spent the night fishing. No luck. They have caught nothing. In spite of this, the instruction of Jesus is clear, “Cast out into the deep water.” Simon protested but still obeyed. The outcome was astonishing. Two boatloads of fish.

As we initiate a New Year of commitment to justice and charity should we not employ this same command of Jesus – “Cast out into deep water.”? It is the image which Pope John Paul II employed in his Apostolic Letter “Novo Millennio Ineunte” as he figuratively opened the door to the 3rd millennium: “Let us go forward in hope! A new millennium is opening before the Church like a vast ocean upon which we shall venture, relying on the help of Christ. The Son of God, who became incarnate two thousand years ago out of love for humanity, is at work even today: we need discerning eyes to see this and, above all, a generous heart to become the instruments of his work.” (p. 58)

The instruction of Jesus to cast out into deep waters is applicable in the present context as we are pushed to go forward engaging the most challenging issues even though our mood might be to be less aggressive. We ask: Is there hope of moving the social justice agenda forward? With the encouragement of the Gospel, I propose we forge ahead with heightened attention to key issues on which many other questions hinge. “Due ad altum.” “Let us cast out into the deep.”

As we move forward, it is helpful, I believe, to establish a two-fold platform that would serve as the foundation for our overall agenda.

The first is the clear assertion that social justice efforts are ultimately based on the natural law. Natural law can assist in its understanding by referring to the concept of “self-evident truths” which the founders of our country spelled out in the Declaration of Independence.

The landmark encyclical “Pacem In Terris,” teaches “Many people think that the laws which govern man’s relations with the State are the same as those which regulate the blind, elemental forces of the universe. But it is not so; the laws which govern men are

quite different. The Father of the universe has inscribed them in nature, and there is where we must look for them; there and nowhere else.” (¶6.)

The second point which constitutes the platform of social justice teaching is that justice is ordered to serve the common good. Pacem in Terris substantiates this position also: “For the common good, since it is intimately bound up with human nature, can never exist fully and completely unless the human person is taken into account at all times. Thus, attention must be paid to the basic nature of the common good and what it is that brings it about (p. 39).

Reference to and dependency on the natural law and the common good are essential in our advocacy efforts insofar as they stand as the basis for protecting the life and dignity of the human person. They are accessible to all people and thus can be utilized in the codification of laws that are universally applicable. They do not impose one’s religious beliefs on others in a secular society.

Undergirded by these two guiding principles, I propose we examine issues that are most pressing at the moment. Would it not be beneficial to coalesce in strong solidarity for the benefit of justice and peace on these matters?

In the international sphere there are two vexing issues that cry for resolution – The Palestinian-Israeli stand-off and the world-wide issue of hunger and food security. A question that bridges domestic and global concerns is religious liberty. On the domestic scene we are called especially to address abortion, immigration reform and poverty. All of these questions fall within the realm of the natural law and the common good.

In the international area unrelenting unified insistence on efforts to end the prolonged stand-off between Israel and Palestine is critical before time runs out. The National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East, also known as NILI, in a recent statement portrays the current situation: “Twilight has fallen on the possibility of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Jewish, Christian and Muslim

religious leaders committed to peace, we urge immediate, sustained U.S. leadership before darkness falls on the hopes for a peaceful resolution.”

The U.S. government is in the best position to lend weighted influence on both sides of this conflict to bring peace and establish two viable, independent states as has been long supported by the international community. In this regard the NILI statement reads: “Our nation has unique leverage and credibility in the region. Indeed, no past progress towards peace has occurred in this conflict without U.S. leadership, facilitation or staunch support. Once again, we need active, fair and firm U.S. leadership to help break the current deadlock and to achieve a two-state peace agreement now before it is too late.”

A scandal that continues to gnaw at the world’s conscience is hunger and malnourishment of millions causing suffering and death in many countries. Included in this group are five million children. Agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome, and the World Food Prize in Des Moines seek to come to grips with this embarrassment. Through development of crops adaptable to climatic and soil conditions, and through transportation strategies, such suffering would move much closer to a permanent healing.

The significant issue that bridges both domestic and international concerns is that of religious liberty. Pope benedict XVI has underlined the paramount significance at stake in the 2011 World Day of Peace Message: “It could be said that among the fundamental rights and freedoms rooted in the dignity of the person, religious freedom enjoys a special status. When religious freedom is acknowledged, the dignity of the human person is respected at its root, and the ethos and institutions of peoples are strengthened. On the other hand, whenever religious freedom is denied, and attempts are made to hinder people from professing their religion or faith and living accordingly, human dignity is offended. . .” (¶. 5)

The religious liberty cause focuses on the basics of being able to worship, to eradicate outright persecution experienced by persons of faith – Christians finding themselves

victims more than any other faith traditions. Thirdly, in the U.S., the prolonged controversy over the HHS mandate has surfaced challenges to First Amendment guarantees – such as defining what is religious activity and when it is exercised, and preserving conscience protection.

Moving to the domestic side of the ledger, abortion looms so very large. 40 years after *Roe v. Wade* and some 50 million premature deaths later, education, public witness and protest and compassion for mothers who stand isolated and have what are seemingly impossible obstacles all need to be employed in the battle to achieve reversal of the current unjust law. Essential to this cause is the widespread mobilization of social justice advocates who depend on natural law and the common good as the foundation of their motivating convictions. All social justice issues are important. But the Gospel of Life by virtue of the sheer injustices methodically rendered to the most vulnerable and helpless rises to the top priority.

Immigration reform has sparked recent bipartisan support from federal legislators eliciting justifiable optimism that this long simmering difficulty will find a solution. We cannot rest secure until legislation is enacted that will create a pathway for eventual citizenship, be family friendly, introduce trade practices that facilitate remaining in one's country of origin and of course, secure our country's borders.

The third principal issue, I cite on the domestic front, is preserving the “circle of protection” for the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities. The budget is a moral document since it seriously impacts the lives of fellow citizens – all of whom have a God-given dignity insofar as each is God's child made in his image and likeness. It is our responsibility to ensure those who transparently need assistance, receive it. An important corollary to this is providing education and training for those seeking work. This also supports the dignity attributable to human persons, their talents and legitimate pride.

There are innumerable other issues that merit our attention, such as protecting God’s creation and environment, eliminating the death penalty, reducing nuclear arms and expanding verifiable disarmament, guaranteeing fair wages, developing federal and state budgets that exemplify fairness in reining in runaway deficits etc. etc. But motivated by Jesus’ injunction – “Cast out into the deep” does it not seem strategically sensible to coalesce around seemingly intractable problems for the sake of effectiveness? Social advances are achieved when society arrives at a broad consensus.

In our times, the prophetic role in our Judeo-Christian tradition is entrusted in large measure to the laity. Your vocation is to be leaven and light to the world carrying the torch that implicitly evangelizes. God is expressing through all the baptized His commitment to a civilization of love. In his inimitable style Pope Benedict capsulizes the role of the lay person in Deus Caritas Est: “The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society, on the other hand, is proper to the lay faithful. As citizens of the State, they are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity. So they cannot relinquish their participation in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good.” (§29)

We gather during these days, 16 national Catholic organizations committed to sharing and applying Catholic Social Teaching. On the threshold of the season of Lent, we are constituted as members of the body of Christ. We are one. We are called to be of one mind and one heart. As the Lord raises the questions, “Whom shall I send? who will go for us?” “Here we are”, we say, “send us.”