

Homily
February 15, 2012
Closing Liturgy
Catholic Social Ministry Gathering

Bishop Richard Pates

I am honored and indeed happy to be among some 400 fellow social justice devotees. You pursue a religion that is pure and undefiled because of your uncompromising passion for justice and charity for the widow and the orphan and all our sisters and brothers whom James would identify as worthy of our care.

As the four or five days you have spent as a part of the annual Catholic Social Ministry gathering wind down, you seek to consolidate your experiences and learnings. You ask: How do I further embrace and implement the theme of these days: “Faithful citizenship, protecting human life and dignity, promoting the common good,” when I get back home?

The scriptures, just proclaimed, offer guidance as we formulate resolve for participation in the looming election cycle.

Before we jump headlong into the fray with a list of ever so crucial issues, we could benefit from a check of our attitude, our mentality, our approach in the advocacy enterprise of justice. This examination is prompted by the intriguing element in the account of the blind man’s healing.

Which of us does not at times, or habitually in some area of our lives, “delude ourselves” so that others appear to us as reduced or distorted “people looking like trees and walking?” In raising the question, we recognize our own need for a purification of mind, spirit and body – and that Christ in his healing mercy will heal our insufficient perception of ourselves, our sisters and brothers in every context and in our world?

How do we open ourselves to this healing of our perception and invite others to do so as well? It is with the spirit of prayerfulness and humility that we will be most ready to act authentically, boldly and lovingly for justice. We pray without ceasing that Jesus time and again touch our eyes that we may see as He sees but even more that he touch the eyes of our hearts that we may feel as He feels.

In this era of polarization when fairness, honest exchange and truth are sacrificed in the interest of winning must we not ask? When we so act and cease to listen to one another, judge one another through stereotypes based on sound bytes, and make use of divisive language and media, are we not failing to see each other as fellow children of God in our full humanity and dignity? We must further ask: How can we invite the Spirit as we educate and support one another in practicing habits of magnanimity in the midst of election year culture that will tempt us to abandon a Christ like way of proceeding in favor of an “any means to a just end” attitude?

In seeking to integrate the character of our actions with their content, we find direction in the responsorial psalm, Psalm 15:

“Who shall live on your holy mountain, O, Lord?”

The response: “He who walks blamelessly and does justice, who thinks the truth in his heart and slanders not with his tongue.”

Climbing up the mountain of the Lord is arduous, requiring discipline, instruction and support. But when we arrive and choose to remain, we are privileged to participate in the vision of God. Our vantage point is God’s insofar as our human limitations do not block this vision and insofar as they allow us to absorb the wisdom God shares.

The revelation that is communicated as self-evident truth and embedded in the Sacred scriptures is that each person is created solely out of the urgency of God’s love. We are created in His image and likeness. Because the instigator is God each person is of inestimable value and has a transcendent destiny. The responsibility entrusted to us in participating in the divine plan is simply to protect each gift of human life from conception until natural death.

Concomitant with this is the responsibility to render dignity to each of those same persons throughout their lives. This is justice. This is achieved especially in institutionalizing in our culture the means to make, a daily reality, the dignity of those who are poor. The prophet Micah beautifully describes this reality. “You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

The second Vatican Council codified God’s deepest wishes by declaring the Church’s fundamental option for the poor.

“. . . the right of having a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone. **The Fathers and Doctors of the Church held this opinion, teaching that men are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods.** . . . remember the aphorism of the Fathers, ‘Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him, you have killed him, and really to share and employ their earthly goods, according to the ability of each, especially by supporting individuals or peoples with the aid by which they may be able to help and develop themselves.’” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 69)

As a result, one lens that is required and through which we view relationships and advocate and establish public policy is how these policies will impact the poor.

It is obvious that everyone has a right to a decent, dignified life. This requires a reasonable sharing of the earth’s resources. We are inspired by those who choose to share spontaneously, acting on natural instinct. Rose Totino, founder of Totino’s pizza

and a philanthropist from Minneapolis who fashioned herself as a feminist, gave her wealth away, mostly to the poor, before she died. She observed, "I have never seen a U-Haul behind a hearse yet."

This responsibility, at the same time, belongs to us as people organized in government. Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est* stated that for charity to be effective it must be organized. And in *Caritas in Veritate* the Pope identifies greed as a significant component contributing to the world-wide recession. He contends that greed must be curbed since millions of the poor suffer disproportionately and unnecessarily as a result.

As we pursue bringing justice to the poor, the "what" of our activity needs to be balanced with the "How." In one of the principal issues of our time, the Church recognizes access to healthcare as a human right. The Church maintains a teaching on the ethics of healthcare that is directed to maintaining the dignity of each person and considers this teaching to be a "matter of conscience."

In both the private and public arenas, the founders of our nation recognized the right of free exercise of religion and its companion "freedom of conscience" and thus enshrined this right in the 1st Amendment of the Constitution. In the recent unanimous Supreme Court decision, *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and school v. EEOC* this longstanding tradition is upheld. Chief Justice Roberts pinpoints the meaning of this right when he states on behalf of his fellow judges "The Government is not to tell religion what it is to believe."

In addition the decision states: "The First Amendment provides, in part, that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.'"

Thus, the original rules established by the cabinet department of Health and Human Services implementing healthcare legislation are unacceptable. These rules as applied to Catholic Church institutions violated the First Amendment and the precious right of conscience. The revised rules as recently proposed by the President need to be studied to determine if they correct the concerns. We further ask, at this juncture, should the protective surety needed be pursued by legislation or judicial determination? As we insist that governmental intrusion into the freedom of religion is unacceptable we serve the common good by preserving a right that is a cornerstone of our democracy.

This past August, I had the opportunity to visit Cote d'Ivoire as a member of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops International Justice and Peace Committee. The mission was simple – to express solidarity and support for our sister Ivorian church as the Ivorian community and the Church emerged from years of combative turbulence and six months of civil war.

All of us appreciate a friend in times of trouble. We, bishops of the United States, sought to be that friend. As we were leaving at the conclusion of our mission, the priest who serves as Secretary General of the Ivory Coast Bishops Conference nearly crushed my

hand in shaking it as he bid farewell: “Now, I truly understand, in the concrete,” he said “what we mean when we say the Church is One and Catholic.”

From the mountaintop of the Lord, we see that the human family is one. All are children of God. The shrinking of the globe necessitates sharing our vision of justice with and on behalf of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. From our perspective as the most wealthy nation it is imperative to embrace the poor world-wide and accord the justice that is their due.

One of the highlights of the visit to Cote d’Ivoire was a meeting at the United Nations mission in that country. Particularly impressive was the head of that mission. He was from neighboring Benin and a long-time executive of the United Nations.

As he described the goals of the United Nations in the Ivory Coast – making provisions for legislative elections, establishing security, setting the path to representative government – I was struck by his vision of the actual people who would give birth to a new country after decades of fierce division and strife.

He was counting on the Ivorian who would be cooperative, selflessly working for the common good, a person willing to set aside deep resentment and anger for the sake of peace, a person who valued education and human development and who is committed to a true sense of the dignity of each person.

I commended the United Nations’ mission head for his philosophy, his advocacy, his working commitment based on such an understanding of the human person. In response, in straight forward language, he said, “Well, bishop, I am Catholic. I firmly believe in the “new man”, the person redeemed in Jesus Christ and who is now fully capable of living that redeemed life today.”

As we return home, may our conviction be equally strong for therein lies our hope and the inevitability of justice prevailing in our time.