

Talk
Church of the Visitation
Kansas City, Missouri
February 4, 2016

Introduction

I am very happy to return to be with the parishioners of Visitation and be a fortunate participant in your ongoing adult education series.

To begin, I wish to commend Peggy Ekerdt, Pastoral Associate, for her stellar work in this field. She was good enough to extend a second invitation to me. And at this time, I assure her of heartfelt condolences on the occasion of the death of her Mother. Our prayers and ongoing support are with you, and all of your family, Peg.

My longtime good friend, Father Pat Rush, decided to bail out and wisely chose to go to Florida this week. He's heard Pates for over 40 years. Nothing new! He enjoys my best wishes for a much deserved week in the sun.

Finally, I am very honored that Bishop Van Johnston, your newly installed Bishop has joined us for this occasion. We have been colleagues for nearly eight years in Region IX as fellow bishops. I count Bishop Johnston as a friend. He is a good man. In my opinion, the Diocese of Kansas City is most fortunate to have a leader of his caliber as your bishop. Welcome Bishop Johnston.

My talk this evening focuses on three areas that have been prominent in the vision of Pope Francis: creation, peace and economy. The main thrust of my talk is that the resolutions of significant problems in each of these areas surpasses the stance of either the Republican or Democratic Party. What is called for is common cause on our part founded on Gospel-based, Christian ethics. It is putting our faith into action.

The format this evening will be my presentation, small group discussion and then a general wrap-up sharing observations and posing questions.

Visitation Parish Community
Kansas City

“Politics Aside: What is our Faith Driven Responsibility in the World Today?”

By Bishop Richard Pates
Bishop of Des Moines
February 4, 2016

Introduction

In January, I had the opportunity to participate in an international gathering of Catholic bishops in Lisbon, Portugal. The Conference was sponsored by the Acton Institute of Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the topic of the intersection between the free market and Catholic social justice teaching. I was the only American. The majority of the group were from Africa and Central and South America. Upon learning that I was from Iowa, they immediately engaged conversation on the American elections.

First of all, they were astounded at the tenor of the political conversation and how negative it was in terms of candidates' positions. Also, it seemed distant from appreciation of a people who were the wealthiest in history. Moreover, the resolution of significant problems was bellicose and dependent on military force.

Had we Americans not heard of Pope Francis? Had we of Christian persuasion not been challenged by the path of dialogue? What does the Holy Father mean when he constantly affirms? “We are one human family. We are all brothers and sisters.”

The bishops, almost in chorus, emphasized how important the American elections are. They establish a direction for the rest of the world with implications for pursuing a sustainable peace

and grappling with widespread hunger and poverty and the huge migrations of peoples especially those running from the inferno of Iraq and Syria.

The lights, therefore, are shining on us. We Americans are being called to incorporate our Christian values and beliefs into the political process in a manner that reflects what best serves the human scene.

But, we protest, given the current positions of the two major parties, that when interspersed with our religious convictions, we do not find a readily comfortable home in either major party – democrat or republican. But the privilege of civic participation and voting and the responsibility we hold for the common good leave no alternative. We must engage. But how?

We need to articulate core principles that serve as a foundation for our position that also coincide with the natural law – that law which is embedded in our souls, in our very bones, which the U.S. Declaration of Independence describes as “truths that are self-evident.”

These inbred instincts and convictions have been formulated into propositions which we know as human rights which carry with them corresponding responsibility.

The foundational right is that of life from conception until natural death. This concept embraces the truth that each of us humans is made in the image and likeness of God with an eternal destiny. Cardinal Bernardin described the application of the principle insuring life and dignity to which every person is entitled as that of “the seamless garment.” It embraces the entire continuum of one’s life.

Pope Francis has emphasized three principal dimensions of our life together which need to be addressed if we are to be objectively concerned about human plight and a living out of our Gospel rooted values: Creation, peace and economy.

Creation

The Holy Father focused world attention on the environment with his acclaimed encyclical “Laudato Si” or “On Care for Our Common Home.”

In his September 25th address to the United Nations, the core of his teaching on creation was outlined: “The common home of all men and women must continue to rise on the foundations of a right understanding of universal fraternity and respect for the sacredness of every human life, of every man and every woman, the poor, the elderly, children, the infirm, the unborn, the unemployed, the abandoned, those considered disposable because they are only considered as part of a statistic. This common home of all men and women must also be built on the understanding of a certain sacredness of human nature.”

Laudato Si, conceived within the framework of human and environmental ecology, is a clarion call for universal action to reverse ailing Mother Earth’s health condition. Evidence abounds: pollution and waste, widespread experience of radical climate variation, reduction of safe water which is the “stuff of life” and loss of biodiversity. More distressing is the impact on human life – where the poor suffer intolerably and societies and cultures are unraveling.

At the heart of this environmental disruption is what has been termed “climate change.” The Pope concurs with the preponderant analysis of 96% of the scientific community. This change, in large measure, occurs when carbon dioxide is emitted from the use of carbon fuels – coal, oil and gas coupled with deforestation and clearing of the resources which help maintain equilibrium in the atmosphere by absorbing excessive carbon that is being produced.

What basically happens is that a “greenhouse” effect is developed in the atmosphere trapping heat in a ceiling that increases temperature which, in turn, has a significant impact on the pattern of the climate, the form of water and the sustainability of microorganisms and other impressions of life which contribute to the balance of nature and its sustainability.

The scientific consensus is clear: climate change is for real. The Pope asserts that this change with its destructive results is caused by human action. The undergirding of this debilitating movement is supported by a philosophy that is human – anthropocentric – centered.

Contrary to the Christian vision, as so beautifully and poetically espoused by St. Francis of Assisi, which regards all creation as God’s gift to be revered and enjoyed within the framework of preserving and sustaining it, this outlook basically holds that the earth, and all of nature, exist for human use thus justifying and encouraging its exploitation. It is a system that promotes endless consumption of material goods with the assumption that such a way of life will bring happiness. What is occurring is the world is being used up. There will be little if anything left for the benefit of generations to follow us.

Given the fact that the problem of climate change is the outcome of human activity, it can also be reversed by human intervention. The Pope leads us to a hopeful perspective that should galvanize us into action based on a love of creation, of nature and its beauty in and unto itself.

Secondly, we are called to be attentive to the three billion persons who are suffering and are left behind in a proportionate sharing of God’s providence. They represent what Pope Francis terms the “throw-away” culture. One of the ways their lives can be enhanced, their God-given dignity recognized and respected is by reversing the suffering emanating from environmental degradation. The goods of the world necessary for survival, indeed the flourishing of human nature, are intended for universal application. They are not to be hoarded by a select minority. St. John Chrysostom brings this principle into close focus. He asserts that if I wear one pair of shoes and have another in the closet – that which is in the closet belongs to the poor man who has no shoes.

At a certain point, some claim that as early as 2075 the damage to the environment may be irreversible. We must pay forward to future generations providing them a home that will be habitable, preserving the wonder of God’s goodness. We should do so because we can do it. In response to the welcome at the White House, on September 23rd during his visit to the United States, Pope Francis stated: “Mr. President, I find it encouraging that you are proposing an

initiative for reducing air pollution. Accepting the urgency, it seems clear to me also that climate change is a problem that can no longer be left to a future generation. When it comes to the care of our “common home” we are living at a critical moment of history. We still have time to make the changes needed to bring about a “sustainable and integral development, for we know things can change.” (Laudato Si, 13)

We are all born into life on this planet. This common home is an unmerited gift. Through creation, God has provided for us an abundant Mother: Earth. Earth's health is imperiled by a relational breakdown with God, with fellow humans and with the planet itself. Our faith and the common relationship with one another impel us to address this situation. Our destiny is intertwined - earth and each human person on a common journey. For the Christian, this is in unity with Christ who leads us to the goal of creation - life-giving unity with the Father.

To arrive at this goal, Pope Francis accentuates the reality that all of creation is in communion. Echoing St. Francis of Assisi, the Holy Father proclaims: "Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth."

The Pope insists that the natural environment is "a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone." Our work to ensure justice and a livable situation for everyone represents "fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone."

In considering the primacy of the human person in creation, those activities which diminish the dignity of each human person are to be challenged. Especially is this so with the emerging supremacy of technology. This development gives rise to a "practical relativism," which translates: if it can be done, do it. Importantly, as we pursue material "progress" we must adhere to the requirement to provide work for people to enable them to achieve the meaning and purpose God has in mind for them - core to the hierarchy of human values.

Moving forward with "environmental conversion," Pope Francis employs a word characterizing his papacy: dialogue. This dialogue occurs on an international scale, on the national and local scene. It emphasizes transparency in decision making, in politics, in economy and religious dialogue with science. In all of these formats, the key is transparency, openness and a commitment to reach resolutions that are in the best interests of each of us individually and as one human family.

Such conversion or change requires us to think of the preservation of that which gives life: air, water, fertile soil. We can do so by being responsible in our own situation but also by joining together in advocacy of those policies that will characterize us as grateful "stewards" so that all God so lovingly created might thrive.

Let me at this point brag about my home state, Iowa. Not the Rose Bowl team or the hot basketball teams. Instead, Iowans have been especially blessed and inspired by leaders who are able to parse the grammar of responsible stewardship. Farmer after farmer who visit with me, tell me that they are committed to leaving the soil and the water for which they are responsible, in much better shape than they inherited it. Wind power has taken off in Iowa. It is now the number two state in the United States producing more such energy per capita than any other state: 57% of our power comes from this source. Right behind is the installation of solar panels – especially in rural areas. The development of renewable energy creates jobs and produces clear, breathable air while enabling us to experience reasonable lifestyle benefits.

An example I like to cite in this regard is that of Justin Doyle, a Catholic engineer in Des Moines who is practical and committed toward healthy economic development. He transforms old buildings through renovation and very importantly the installation of solar energy – which is sustainable and very economical operationally. Outright energy costs in one of his mid-size renovated industrial office buildings are \$16.00 monthly.

The Pope challenges us to dedicate efforts for change in the personal level over which we have control and then on to the ever expanding citizen level which calls for coalitions of influence.

Independent undertakings which he advocates include “avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can be reasonably consumed, showing care for other human beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of practices.”

It is reasonable to ask has there been noticeable, effective change by these individual actions? The Holy Father notes: “People may well have a growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption which, rather than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more. A simple example is the increasing use and power of air conditioning.”

The individual action in climate change needs to evolve to embrace political consensus. That is where progress will be achieved for the common good. It is on such issues that politicians should be coaxed to rise above political advantage based on convoluted differentiation – namely, wedge issues, and be committed to achieving the common good. It is here where Christian citizens join together on issues, which need to be addressed by both parties in the best interests of all God’s children.

It is in finding common ground on questions of universal application that we will be able to move forward in authentic human advancement.

Thus, in this political season, it is up to us citizens, Pope Francis insists, to look beyond short-term, narrow interests to bring about the common good. “Unless citizens control power – national, regional and municipal – it will not be possible to control damage to the environment.”

The Holy See has exerted its influence on the international level, by its intervention and advocacy at the Paris Conference on the Environment. In doing so, it emphasizes that all of the world needs to be on the same page and committed to those policies and action intended for the beneficial global outcome of all. In affirmation of the agreement on climate at the Paris Conference, Pope Francis on January 11th stated:

“This significant accord represents for the entire international community an important achievement; it reflects a powerful collective realization of the grave responsibility incumbent on individuals and nations to protect creation, to promote a “culture of care that permeates all of society.”

“Climate Change and the Common Good” a 2015 April statement of the Pontifical Academy of Science pushes us believers dedicated to the moral good: “Over and above institutional reforms policy changes and technological innovations for affordable access to renewable energy sources, there is a fundamental need to reorient our attitude toward nature and, thereby, toward ourselves. Finding ways to develop a sustainable relationship with nature requires not only the engagement of scientists, political leaders, educators, and civil societies, but will succeed only if it is based on a moral revolution that religious institutions are in a special position to promote.”

“Praise be to you” as an encyclical is not a political document, nor a scientific document, but rather a religious document which our Holy Father, Pope Francis has developed to guide us in the moral order that we might be faithful to the scriptures and teachings of the Church in our times. May it inspire us to unite in generating hope and in building the Kingdom of God.

Peace

We all long for peace in our families, neighborhoods, cities, country and world. Given broken human nature, peace will always be a challenge. Enmity and division with radical outcomes can be traced back to the story of Cain and Abel. Peace is achieved by overcoming inbred tendencies that destroy and separate.

The Holy Father in his message for World Peace Day, January 1st, pinpointed much of the underlying sentiment of indifference which leads to ignoring the plight of the poor, of the very young, of those suffering at the hands of corrupt leaders. How do we engage in works of peace so that the intended mercy of God becomes a dominant factor in the lives of others through us? Such a goal is at the foundation of Pope Francis’ undertaking a jubilee of mercy so that our human hearts can reach out with a feeling of magnanimity and healing to all.

Pope Paul VI declared that development is the new word for peace. In this line, Pope Francis spoke to the diplomatic corps this year:

“The development agenda adopted last September by the United Nations for the next 15 years that deals with many of the problems causing migrations, and other documents of the international community on handling the issue of migration, will be able to make final application consistent with expectations if they are able to put the person at the center of political decisions at every level, seeing humanity as one family, and all peoples as brothers and sisters, with respect for mutual differences and convictions of conscience.”

It is the notion of one human family that has driven the vision of the Holy Father to overcome separation and bring people to the table of peace.

It is this same vision that has led the United States Conference of Bishops to support policies that lead to greater peaceful action, which diminish the seemingly insurmountable hurdles of past positions and history. Thus, it advocated for renewing diplomatic relationships with Cuba and reaching agreement with Iran on the non-development of that country’s nuclear bomb capability. Diplomacy, negotiation and most importantly, as Pope Francis insists, dialogue, are far better than hostility and separation. Peace must be a goal and strenuously pursued with the weapon of the indomitable human spirit for good.

Divisions of people create fear and negativity and shroud the goodness in every human heart. Remember the Berlin Wall? It perpetuated the artificial separation of two peoples creating tension and political conflict – a cold war. Its dismantling opened up interaction and appreciation for culture and history. Aware of that history, do we need more walls?

A wall between Mexico and the United States would speak loudly of our inability to resolve, resolvable issues. Can’t we work together to address root causes of immigrants that come without papers such as the American insatiable appetite for drugs that blossoms into violence, corruption, and the unraveling of education in South and Latin America? We do have the

ingenuity, the resources and I dare say the will to grapple with these problems. Where does our Christian conscience intervene to affect justice and overcome long-standing, unethical even immoral practices?

In his visit to the Central African Republic, the Holy Father raised the consequential role of weapons' merchants who do lucrative business in supplying death machines to opposing military factions that do not have the common good at heart. Conversation of weapons raises the specter of weapons of mass destruction. Should not their very existence be banned? Luminous figures such as Former Secretaries of State Schultz and Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense Perry and Senator Sam Nunn are unequivocally opposed to them.

In the midst of weapons' discussion emerges the darkness of American violence. So much is perpetuated by individuals who have lost their bearings and express their frustration with automatic weapons inducing widespread terror. Where is the common sense and Christian antidote to this nonsense?

When I reflect upon the Christian active in the arena of peace, I recall a highly prominent official from the African country of Benin who was in charge of trying to bring peace to Cote d'Ivoire after its recent civil war.

He demonstrated convictions and values at the heart of our Christian ethic: forgiveness, mercy, justice, compassion, dialogue, new beginnings, releasing sentiments of hatred. When I expressed admiration for his putting into practice his convictions, he simply replied, "Well, Bishop, I am a Catholic and my faith compels me to such action expressing the love of Christ."

Economy

Known for his directness, Pope Francis in replying to the invitation to participate in the Davos' Conference on economic activity in January, raised the question:

"What are we going to do about the poor?"

This question epitomizes the preoccupation of Pope Francis for the poor. His position is well grounded in the Gospels in which Jesus evidences the same preoccupation, from the Pope's cultural heritage in South America and in the Catholic Church's "Preferential Option for the Poor" originating from the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council.

Thus, the Pope relentlessly advocates for those suffering and deprived. To the U.S. Congress in September he stated:

. . . "keep in mind all those people around us who are trapped in a cycle of poverty. They too need to be given hope. The fight against poverty must be fought consistently and on many fronts, especially in its causes. I know that many Americans today, as in the past, are working to deal with this problem."

"It goes without saying that part of this great effort is the creation and distribution of wealth. The right use of natural resources, the proper application of technology and the harnessing of the spirit of enterprise are essential elements of an economy that seeks to be modern, inclusive and sustainable."

As we engage these issues we identify with David as he battled Goliath: There are 62 billionaires in the world who have the total wealth of 3.6 billion people or approximately half the world's inhabitants combined.

The conditions which the poor live under – lack of education, joblessness, hunger, malnutrition, poor health and inadequate housing, lack of proper sanitation, corruption, poor government, etc., etc. seem almost insurmountable.

In facing these seemingly impossible tasks, we find encouragement from Mother Theresa, on docket to be proclaimed a Saint in this Jubilee of Mercy. When asked how she was going to take care of the millions upon millions of the poor, she replied simply, "One person at a time."

What our Christian convictions speak most directly to – is that we should activate them without hesitation or fear.

Conclusion

We come then to the frustration that we experience in the limitations in achieving the common good through partisan politics in which neither party advocates the entirety of our Christian ethic.

The response is, given our own lights in the practical realm, we should follow the political party which from our perspective can attain much of what is at stake for the common good.

At the same time, often it will be necessary to rise above party limitations and join in common cause. In so doing, we pursue that path, enlightened by the Gospel, which recognizes the value of each human person and renders to that person the life and dignity to which he or she is entitled as a child of God.