



Archdiocese of Newark

Office of Communications & Public Relations

171 Clifton Ave.

Newark, NJ 07104

www.rcan.org

Contact:

Jim Goodness

973-497-4186

973-202-2317

goodneja@rcan.org

For Release

February 7, 2017

**Text of Address by
Cardinal Joseph William Tobin, C.Ss.R.,
Archbishop of Newark,
to the US Regional World Meeting of Popular Movements,
Modesto, CA, Feb. 16-19, 2017**

Following the excellent address of His Eminence, Cardinal Peter Turkson, I would like to offer a few reflections for this auspicious gathering of the US Regional World Meeting of Popular Movements, with the hope of providing some context for the dynamics we see at play within our nation. I hope this modest contribution will encourage you.

As we look around our beloved country we can see dark clouds gathering. Your work of building community and calling all of us to truly “see” one another is needed now more than ever.

In his apostolic exhortation, the *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis denounced an “economy of exclusion” – one that puts profits over people and considers people only as consumers of goods and workers as cogs in a profit-making machine. And in his address to the second World Meeting of Popular Movements in Bolivia in 2015, he talked about “an invisible thread” which runs through the many forms of exclusion we experience in our world – the invisible thread of greed and economic exploitation. The prioritizing of profits over people has created a deep sense of economic anxiety among many, many families struggling to make ends meet. The resulting concentration of wealth in our country in the hands of a few has created historic levels of economic inequality, which has placed a great burden on working families and the poor – and let us not forget that many families are both working and poor!

This pain cuts across all regions of our country, and across all racial and ethnic groups. This pain is real, and must be engaged, by both pastors and community organizers.

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The concentration of wealth and – by extension – political power in our country also threatens to undermine the health of our democracy. When heads of households are coping with chronic economic stress, and it feels like no one – in City Hall, or the State Capitol, or Washington, DC – really understands their struggles, they can begin to feel alienated from civic participation and effectively disenfranchise themselves, ceding the public arena to interest groups and lobbyists, and even demagogues.

Fear, Populism and Nationalism

Weakened civic infrastructure means even less capacity to resolve shared challenges, and that has fed a cycle of disengagement, alienation, even despair among many. In that context, it's not hard to get people to look around for someone to blame for the struggles they face. It is a phenomenon we see unfolding across many parts of the world today. Those in power, or those who seek power, begin to demonize excluded groups – people who look, sound, or believe differently from the dominant group. This act of misdirection – channeling the anger of anxious people toward “the other” rather than toward the architects of the economy of exclusion – is a classic tactic of a populist leader, and the rise of populism and nationalism in the United States has laid bare a second “invisible thread” that, sadly, has promoted the exclusion and marginalization of people in our American experience, intensifying in times of fear and anxiety: the sins of racism and xenophobia.

We are urged to place our anger and frustration and fear onto the backs of the scapegoats of our day – immigrants, Muslims, young people of color – and to build walls - border walls and prison walls - that will keep “them” out of “our” communities. In his recent address to the third World Meeting of Popular Movements in Rome, Pope Francis observed that fear “is fed and manipulated... Because fear – as well as being a good deal for the merchants of arms and death – weakens and destabilizes us, destroys our psychological and spiritual defenses, numbs us to the suffering of others, and in the end it makes us cruel.” We are a country – and a Church – that has always been enriched by immigrants who have come to find their future here, and to help shape our shared future with their blood, sweat and tears.

Encounter and Dialogue

The way that we overcome fear, alienation and indifference is through the powerful actions of “encounter” and “dialogue”. Through the intentional choice to engage with one another, sharing our experiences, and listening for common ground, we discover and activate our own capacity for compassion, the ability to “feel with” another person the core emotions that make us human and bind us together. Your meeting is a

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wonderful opportunity for encounter and dialogue. If you're like the family I grew up in, you may not agree on everything, but you will uncover shared values and build strong bonds that will nurture collaboration.

Solidarity and Accompaniment

Encounter and dialogue create the capacity for solidarity and accompaniment. People who have experienced economic and racial exclusion build community through sharing their stories and their hunger for change. They are joined by others whose faith calls them into solidarity through the action of encounter, and a larger community is formed. This unity creates new capacity to change the world, to be the "social poets" that Pope Francis has called popular movement leaders.

Roles and Responsibilities for Social Movements and the Church

Pope Francis has said that he prefers "a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."

We must be on guard, lest we fall into the trap of indifference, which Pope Francis warned of when he said: "Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own."

Friends, it is *our responsibility* to respond to the pain and anxiety of our brothers and sisters: As popular movements, your role is to knit together strong communal networks that can gather up the experiences and suffering and aspirations of the people and push for structural changes that affirm the dignity and value of every child of God. And your role is also to call us in the Church to walk with you on your journey, to "accompany" you as the Holy Father likes to say, like Jesus on the Road to Emmaus. And at times, I and my brother bishops, and faithful clergy and women religious, must even walk out in front of you, to show that we are not afraid, either.

So, I thank you for your witness, for your powerful work of building community and organizing and transforming systems in ways that move us toward that Beloved Community of which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke so powerfully. And I pray for you, your families and your communities.

And I ask you to pray for us, so that God might grant us the courage to also speak truth to power whenever it is needed.

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