

Monday of Week III-2  
(Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, 2020)

When the Philippines fell to the enemy during the Second World War, Father Verbis Lafleur, an Army Air Corps chaplain from Lafayette, LA, elected to stay with his men and was captured. A natural leader, he rallied the other prisoners of war and cleverly frustrated attempts to coerce them into helping the war effort by appearing to contribute, but undoing whatever they did. Already the Geneva Convention forbade the use of POW's to contribute to the war effort, but you cannot argue questions of law when faced with a bayonet.

In the end as the Allies were retaking the islands, the prison ship that now housed Father Lafleur and his fellow prisoners was torpedoed by the eventual victors and he perished pushing his fellow captives to safety from the hold of the ship. He died giving life to others. A fellow prisoner of his once wrote to me to tell me of this heroism and to mention that he converted to Catholicism because of the priest's example. The man's son is now a priest.

The story of creative heroism is a good one for our times and for the theme of this year's Catholic social ministry gathering: bearing witness: life and justice for all. You see, we have to be grounded in the Gospel and astute in the ways that it can empower our actions to renew our society.

You know, King David represents an extremely interesting Old Testament figure. He enjoyed a profound relationship with Almighty God, but is also a shrewd politician. As a national leader he must ensure the unity of the Twelve Tribes of the Chosen People; otherwise he will merely be the local lord of the Tribe of Juda.

With immense respect for King Saul and his family, he carefully knits national unity so that he appears as a figure that represents the fundamental values of the Chosen People and an effective leader. You recall how he always respected the person of the king, even when his own life was threatened. He would not lift his hand against the Lord's anointed and punished those who did.

I do not want to downplay his respect or the authenticity of his motives, but today's passage clearly shows David's success in uniting the Tribes of Israel and conquering Jerusalem to make it his royal capital where he will prepare for the building of the great temple.

You and I gather in this perfect prayer, because we are convinced of the virtue taught by Jesus Christ and we want to promote both those virtues and the values they inspire in the hearts of disciples. We believe that we have something to offer to our brothers and sisters. We want to fill them with life and promote a more just society. The Gospel looks kindly upon the needy. Should not our national budget give attention to the poor and vulnerable in US society and around the world?

Important are the methods we choose. David was astute. The Lord Jesus turns the argument on His interlocutors so that they can begin to open to the message of truth. Twenty-nine of my forty-three plus years of ordained ministry were spent outside of the US in places where English was not the local language. I remember watching with amusement when a fellow countryman would assume that he or she became more comprehensible if the volume were raised or was frustrated, because the interlocutor does not speak English. Neither approach improves communication.

Seeking creative ways to pass the message of the Gospel effectively evangelizes, but it requires effort. In these days as you celebrate the call to witness, seek ways to make that witness effective and penetrating. Render effective service to the Gospel and the Nation that we love.

Of course, to be astute in evangelizing, we have to be evangelized. Archbishop Hughes just preached a retreat to the Bishops of Regions IV and XIV and his theme was to allow ourselves to be evangelized by the Gospel of joy. You and I struggle to deepen our knowledge of the Gospel and to pattern our lives on what we believe.

We gather here at the beginning of our day to drink in once more the truth that Jesus Christ revealed and to renew our living of His message. We cannot be effective witnesses to others if we do not first mirror what we have heard.

I am so glad that we gather on the memorial of St. Angela Merici, the foundress of the Ursuline Sisters. She dedicated her life to the education of young children, especially girls at a time when education for them was not a value. As a product of an Ursuline school for the first nine years of my education, I am grateful for that foundation.

Should we not also try to ensure a good foundation and education for others? Should we not urge attention to the environment so that we can pass on the beauties of this world to the next generation? Certainly, we cannot want it all for ourselves.

To be grounded in the Gospel we must pay attention to all of the words and not limit ourselves to just those that appeal: "There are words of condemnation, because the conversion proposed by the Lord is serious. A superficial movement of feeling is not sufficient."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, what happens in the Gospel passage this morning? The Scribes and the Pharisees cannot deny the miracles of Jesus and so they try to accuse Him of drawing power from Satan. Their reasoning is faulty, but perhaps they hope that no one will notice.

However, Jesus carefully refutes their argument by demonstrating the lack of logic and effectively announcing that the reign of Satan is over, because the Kingdom of God has arrived in the person of Jesus Christ. We firmly believe in that arrival and strive to make His life and justice a reality for all. We want to renew our society with Gospel values.

We want to ensure that the same society welcomes immigrants: both those fleeing difficult conditions at home and those who are already here. In 1890 when my

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<sup>1</sup> Zevini and Cabra, *Lectio Divina*, 5, p. 109.

grandparents arrived on these shores, they did not have much money in their pockets, but they accepted the welcome, lived in a tenement, and worked hard. Can we say no to those who continue to arrive filled with hope for a better future?

The Gospel passage introduces the sin against the Holy Spirit or the conscious and willful denial of the love of God. That should foster our sense of responsibility to ensure that the human person does not reach that point. We do so through our charitable action. Yesterday you had opportunities to see again what Catholic Charities does and today Catholic Relief Services will remind you of what it does so effectively throughout the world.

We renew our commitment to an earnest striving for a society that mirrors justice and rejoices in the universality of that justice. As we your bishops have insisted, we do so with a civil discourse that witnesses to the dignity of the human person regardless of his or her positions or disagreement with me. Learn from David, the statesman who achieved national unity by seeing where his people were and guiding them to where they might be.

It certainly cannot be through the senseless violence which cheapens life and makes everyone a victim. You and I must be able to inspire something better. I like to joke that the Fathers of the Nation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment could only have been thinking of flintlocks. Could we not be strict interpreters of the Constitution and defend the right to bear a flintlock?

Louis Evely wrote that it is easy to convert the world: just make the Holy Spirit visible.<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is easier to say that than to make it happen. That is why we need heroic examples like Father Verbis Lafleur so that we might be inspired by the Gospel and able to witness to its power in the ordinary activities of each day.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. L. Evely, *Meditazioni sul Vangelo*, p. 156.