

**ADDRESS OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE  
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
CATHOLIC SOCIAL MINISTRY GATHERING  
WASHINGTON, D.C. – JANUARY 25, 2025**

My dear sisters and brothers:

I am grateful to Archbishop Broglio and for those at the Bishops' Conference who have invited me to participate in this event. To all of you who are here, may I convey the Holy Father's spiritual closeness and affection. This is a very impressive gathering of leaders in the Church's social ministry. I see this as an excellent opportunity to *listen* to one another, to *dialogue*, and to *discern* what the Spirit wants us to do in our mission for the common good and for the promotion of people's human dignity, especially the dignity of people who are poor, and people whose hope of a better future is being threatened. Listening, dialogue, and discerning the Spirit: these are the marks of a synodal Church. Our time together during these days is an opportunity to exercise synodality, not as an end in itself, but as an integral part of what it means to be the Church, and as a help to our mission.

In order to make the presence of Pope Francis among us more concrete, I'd like to recall some of the words that he shared with the United States Congress a little more than nine years ago, only about half a mile from where I stand right now. He said to Congress, and to the American people:

“A nation can be considered great when it defends liberty as [Abraham] Lincoln did, when it fosters a culture which enables people to ‘dream’ of full rights for all their brothers and sisters, as Martin Luther King sought to do; when it strives for justice and the cause of the oppressed, as Dorothy Day did by her tireless work, the fruit of a faith which becomes dialogue and sows peace in the contemplative style of Thomas Merton.”<sup>1</sup>

Each of these “great Americans”, said Pope Francis,

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the Joint Session of the United States Congress, 24 September 2015.

“for all their many differences and limitations, were able by hard work and self-sacrifice [...] to build a better future. They shaped fundamental values which will endure forever in the spirit of the American people. A people with this spirit can live through many crises, tensions and conflicts, while always finding the resources to move forward, and to do so with dignity.”<sup>2</sup>

Since the day when the Holy Father spoke these words in September of 2015, we have witnessed a number of “tensions”: three contentious Presidential elections, the coronavirus pandemic, unrest in American streets, and several new wars. The Pope’s words remain as relevant today as they were then. I cite his words at this gathering, because I believe that they remind us *who we are* and *why we are here*. The four people whom the Pope highlighted were people who followed their prophetic vocation in Christ. That is what we are called to do, especially when we carry out Catholic social ministry.

What does it mean to be a “prophet”? We are prophets when we announce, by our actions and our words, the truth that will transform society: namely, that God loves his people, and that he desires all people to experience their dignity as his children, as well as solidarity with one another as brothers and sisters in the human family. We announce this prophetic message both through our direct social ministry and through our political involvement. In our direct social ministry, we do the works of mercy as a way of revealing to the poor and the excluded their human dignity in Christ. In our political involvement, we reject the narrow self-interest and political gamesmanship that is too often displayed by our leaders. Popular today in many parts of the world is the figure of a “political messiah”. These sorts of leaders claim to identify with people who are exhausted and confused by relativism and contradictory philosophies. But in response to people’s desire for clarity, such leaders propose simplistic and polarizing solutions that do nothing to help a society discern together a pathway to the common good. As Christians, our politics must look different than this. For our part, we see politics as one of the highest forms of

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

charity.<sup>3</sup> Politics, in its true sense, begins with seeing ourselves as a people united in the pursuit of the common good. When we think in this way, instead of in terms of “us versus them”, it is easier to recognize that the first people to whom we must direct our attention are the most vulnerable members of society. A people who takes care of the weakest among them is a people who experiences closeness to God.

In the days of this gathering, there will be the opportunity for discussions of all sorts of Catholic social ministry. But let us remember that all social ministry begins with the poor.

### ***Bringing hope to the poor through justice***

Here is what was stated in the Final Document of the recent Synod:

“‘God’s heart has a special place for the poor’, the marginalized and the excluded. Therefore, they are at the heart of the Church. [...] The direct knowledge of the suffering Christ possessed by the poor makes them heralds of a salvation received as a gift, and witnesses to the joy of the Gospel. The Church is called to be poor with those who are poor, who often constitute the majority of the faithful, to listen to them, learning together how to recognize the charisms they receive from the Spirit. The Church also needs to learn to recognize them as agents of evangelization.”<sup>4</sup>

Poverty, of course, has many different faces. But if we look at the theme of this year’s gathering, we can see how the various forms of poverty are united. The theme is: “Missionaries of Hope, Advocates for Justice”. This implies an inseparable link between justice and hope. A simple way of understanding, “Who are the poor?” is to say: A poor person is anyone who is being deprived of justice. That is to say, they are being forced to live in conditions that make it impossible to envision a better future. Our mission is give such people hope; to show them: Yes, there is something better for you.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Address to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See, 9 January 2025; cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 180; cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 205.

<sup>4</sup> “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission”, Final Document of XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 26 October 2024, 19.

We say that poverty has many “faces” because there are many expressions of injustice that affect people. For this reason, there are many specific areas in which Catholic social ministry is necessary to bring about greater justice—as we can easily observe by the various groups who are represented here. Allow me to mention just three of these areas. In limiting myself to these three, I do not intend to ignore or diminish the essential work being done in other areas. But even if these are not the precise focus of your own apostolate, we can still be united in mind and heart in regard to them. The three areas are: abolition of the death penalty, advocacy for world peace, and the just treatment of migrants and refugees.

### ***Abolition of the death penalty***

On the topic of capital punishment, we are grateful for the commutation of the death sentences of 37 men by the former President one month ago. As stated by Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, Executive Director of Catholic Mobilizing Network, this action “advances the cause of human dignity and underscores the sacred value of every human life”.<sup>5</sup> This was a promising sign that the movement against the death penalty continues to grow. Please God, we will one day live in a country where the killing of those convicted of crimes is not mistaken for justice, and where there are no exceptions. As the Pope has said:

“In every part of the world, believers, and their Pastors in particular, should be one in demanding dignified conditions for those in prison, respect for their human rights and above all the abolition of the death penalty, a provision at odds with Christian faith and one that eliminates all hope of forgiveness and rehabilitation.”<sup>6</sup>

Yesterday, for the 52<sup>nd</sup> year in a row, thousands of people marched in this city to remind our country of the dignity of unborn babies. This has been a powerful witness in American society. It is important that our pro-life advocacy encompass the whole spectrum of life, even as far as the preservation of the lives of those convicted of grave crimes.

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<sup>5</sup> Press Statement by Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, 23 December 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, 10; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2267.

## *Advocacy for world peace*

To be “pro-life” also entails opposing the terrible effects of war, especially on people who are poor. For this reason, a second topic of importance to our social ministry as Catholics in today’s world is a commitment to world peace.

If there is any good that can come from the horrifying reality of what the Pope has often called “a third world war fought piecemeal”, perhaps it can arouse us to a clear awareness that war will never be the answer to differences between peoples and nations. As the Holy Father has written in his recent autobiography: “The intelligent war does not exist. War can bring nothing other than misery. Weapons can bring nothing other than death.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the “faces” of poverty belongs to people who are impoverished by wars over which they have no control, and for which they are not responsible. Blessed John Paul I pointed out that it is the poor “who pay more and suffer more in troubled times and in wars”.<sup>8</sup> When Pope Francis inaugurated this Jubilee, he said:

“I renew my appeal that ‘with the money spent on weapons and other military expenditures, let us establish a global fund that can finally put an end to hunger and favor development in the most impoverished countries, so that their citizens will not resort to violent or illusory situations, or have to leave their countries in order to seek a more dignified life’.”<sup>9</sup>

We may look at the eradication of war as something beyond our ability, or greater than the scope of the mission to which our various apostolates are committed. But we can all do two things at least: we can pray for an end to war, and we can open ourselves to a conversion of attitude toward war. We can no longer afford to assume that war is inevitable.

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Hope: The Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 2025), 23.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Bl. John Paul I, Angelus Address, 10 September 1978.

<sup>9</sup> *Spes Non Confundit*, 16; Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* on Fraternity and Social Friendship, 3 October 2020, 262.

### ***Just treatment of migrants and refugees***

A third topic that should be an important part of our focus in Catholic social ministry is the just treatment of migrants and refugees.

In his address to the diplomatic corps earlier this month, the Holy Father said:

“I find it greatly disheartening to see that migration is still shrouded in a dark cloud of mistrust, rather than being seen as a source of empowerment. People on the move are seen simply as a problem to be managed. They cannot be treated like objects to be moved about; they have dignity and resources that they can offer to others; they have their own experiences, needs, fears, aspirations, dreams, skills and talents.”<sup>10</sup>

And when he inaugurated the Jubilee, the Holy Father said of people who have left their homelands:

“Their expectations must not be frustrated by prejudice and rejection. [...] May the Christian community always be prepared to defend the rights of those who are most vulnerable, opening wide its doors to welcome them, lest anyone ever be robbed of the hope of a better future. May the Lord’s words in the great parable of the Last Judgement always find an echo in our hearts: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’ for ‘just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me’.”<sup>11</sup>

The broken system around migration, which has existed in this country for some time, is a glaring example of the effects of political polarization. Many people, no matter their party affiliation, can recognize the need for national security and respect for law, while at the same time acknowledging the duty of every human society to care for the dignity and wellbeing of people who are pressured by unjust conditions to leave their homeland and seek security elsewhere. No person of goodwill, let alone a Christian, can argue with such basic human values. And yet, as a people, we continue to fail in our duty to come together to enact these values through effective laws and policies. This shows that we still value political control,

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<sup>10</sup> Address to the Diplomatic Corps, 9 January 2025.

<sup>11</sup> *Spes Non Confundit*, 13, citing *Matthew* 25:35, 40.

and fear the loss of it, even more than we value the dignity of those who suffer as victims of our polarization.

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“[W]e have the mind of Christ,” says the Apostle Paul.<sup>12</sup> At this gathering of fellow disciples, even with all of our diversity, there is a special opportunity for us to find stronger and deeper union in that “mind of Christ”. Outside of gatherings such as these, we are constantly bombarded with “the spirit of the world” and with “words taught by human wisdom”.<sup>13</sup> People who belong to this world consider our witness of the Gospel to be “foolishness”.<sup>14</sup> But in this environment, in which we also gather around Christ in the Eucharist, it is important for us to be renewed in our common faith and in our shared commitment to the Spirit of Christ. Let us take advantage of this unity of faith and love. Let us exercise synodality by listening, dialogue, and discerning what is of the Spirit. This will help us to become, in the grace of this Jubilee Year, missionaries of hope and advocates for justice.

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<sup>12</sup> *1 Corinthians* 2:16.

<sup>13</sup> *1 Corinthians* 2:12, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *1 Corinthians* 2:14.