

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
TO THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
PLENARY ASSEMBLY, NOVEMBER 16, 2020**

My Dear Brothers in Christ,

I greet you in the name of Pope Francis, assuring you of his closeness, fraternal support and prayers as you gather for this Virtual Assembly of the Episcopal Conference. I thank His Excellency José H. Gomez, Archbishop of Los Angeles and President of the USCCB, and Msgr. Brian Bransfield and the staff of the USCCB for the invitation to speak to you as you confront emerging challenges for the Church in the United States. In a special way, I want to thank Msgr. Bransfield as he completes his service as General Secretary. I also want to thank the whole body of bishops for your heartfelt wishes on the occasions of the fiftieth and twenty-fifth anniversaries of my priestly and episcopal ordination.

A special word of greeting and congratulations I wish to reserve for His Excellency Archbishop Wilton Gregory, who will be created a Cardinal in the public consistory of November 28th. We rejoice at this nomination as a further sign of the close attention of Pope Francis to the Church in the United States and we wish Archbishop Gregory well.

Each morning, in the dining room of the Nunciature, I usually say to the Councilors or Priest Secretaries, “So, here we are.” Occasionally, I will instead ask a question, “So, where are we?” It is within this framework that I would like to cast my remarks, in light of the recent encyclical of Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*.

Here we are: the Challenge of Healing the World

So, here we are. We wish we could gather together in person to have a truly human encounter to address the pastoral challenges of the Church in the United States. Here we are gathering virtually, called to mediate the closeness of Christ to the People of God in the United States. The Holy Father wrote:

“In our world, ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ’s closeness and his personal gaze. The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this ‘art of accompaniment’” (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 169).

While calling us to make present the “fragrance of Christ’s closeness”, the Pope, through his latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, offers us insights both into the cultural context in which we find ourselves and a direction as to where we might journey together. Here we are gathered, as brothers, but in a specific cultural and social context, which the Holy Father describes as a “closed world” over which loom “dark clouds”, which impede genuine fraternity.

What are these “dark clouds”? One of the largest clouds is the “throwaway culture”, which leads to disregard for human life (in the forms of abortion and euthanasia, human trafficking and new forms of slavery), environmental abuse, and progressive marginalization of groups.

Another is the fragmentation and polarization of society, marked by vicious attacks and attempts to spread despair and discouragement to create a situation of permanent confrontation rather than healing. Another cloud is the rapid growth of secularization, in which people live as if God didn’t exist, creating a greater obstacle in transmitting the faith within the family and from one generation to the next and leaving deep wounds in the Church and society.

Despite great developments in technology, we are experiencing a loss of an ability to empathize or to show concern for the other as a member of the human family. Although a vital tool in evangelization, technology has not been harnessed to overcome the forces of secularization nor to restore a true sense of connectedness as a family and a Church. The Pope believes that true healing of the world demands recognizing our interconnectedness (cf. General Audience, 12 August 2020).

Is this then the perfect storm? Oh, and, I forgot, there is also a global pandemic. So, here we are in the midst of the storm. Yet, we should be mindful of the words of the Gospel: *Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We are going to drown!” He replied, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”*

Jesus is with us in the storm. He brings peace and calm, but having encountered Jesus, things cannot simply return to normal or the way they were. In his Wednesday audiences this summer, entitled “Healing the World”, the Holy Father addressed this point. While seeking a cure for the coronavirus, we also need

to search for a cure for social inequality, the throwaway culture, and progressive marginalization. As Church leaders, when things “return to normal”, we cannot accept inequality as “normal”.

Pastoral conversion means working for justice *and* moving from maintenance to mission with respect to evangelization and parish life. In this regard, I recommend the new Instruction from the Congregation for the Clergy entitled “The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church”, which emphasizes the renewal of parish structures to better proclaim the Word of God, offer the sacraments, and witness to charity.

Where are we? Where are we going?: Insights from Fratelli Tutti

A Samaritan Church to Heal the World: Compassion in a World of Suffering

The question from the Gospel “*What kind of man is this?*” is relevant, because Jesus, true God and true man, is a man like the Good Samaritan. The story of the Good Samaritan is the point of departure for the second chapter of the encyclical and is at the heart of *Fratelli Tutti*, but it is also at the heart of the Gospel.

If we want to “heal the world”, then we must witness to Christ the Good Samaritan who offers healing, mercy, and compassion to a suffering world. Two recent documents offer a strong indication that the Holy Father believes that we should be a Samaritan Church: the letter *Samaritanus Bonus* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*.

The Church suffers from the same problems, the same maladies as the rest of society – polarization, secularization, indifference, worldliness, and the like. These problems not only affect us, but they divide us. Our mission is to heal the world, and these documents are open to hope. I encourage you during your meeting to look at ways that you can feed your hope and that of your flock.

As Catholics – whether in dioceses, parishes, or groups – are we trying to offer hope through a different type of witness – through the type of witness offered by the Samaritan? It is this witness that will attract believers and transform society – the witness to compassion and mercy. Jesus Himself says: “*Go and do likewise*”.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis explores the parable of the Good Samaritan, which illustrates powerfully how to bring healing to a wounded world:

“The parable eloquently presents the basic decision we need to make in order to rebuild our wounded world. In the face of so much pain and

suffering, our only course is to imitate the Good Samaritan. Any other decision would make us either one of the robbers or one of those who walked by without showing compassion for the sufferings of the man on the roadside. The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbors, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good” (Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, 3 October 2020, n. 67).

So, “Are we in the skin of the Samaritan or of the priest and Levite?” We cannot afford to be a Church that is “illiterate” in caring for the frail and vulnerable (nn.64-65) or that is indifferent to the plight of the suffering as the passers-by were, hiding under the guise of religiosity (cf. 74). In a world of suffering, we are called to become neighbors to others. As bishops, we have a special responsibility to lead by example, demonstrating what it means to be a neighbor.

We must answer honestly whether we are receiving this parable merely to transform it to fit our own ideas. How are we educating our people? In a polarized society, the Holy Father asks us to help our people overcome prejudices, personal interests, and historic and cultural barriers. We accept a co-responsibility with others – but we have something distinctive to offer, to help create a society which includes, integrates and lifts up those who are suffering (n. 77).

Strengthening Social Friendship: Love as the Measure of Spiritual Stature

The Lord Jesus calls us to go outside of ourselves (n. 88) just as the Samaritan did. Love is the measure of the spiritual stature of a person (n. 92). Love of neighbor begins with recognizing the dignity and worth of every human person (n. 106) and expands through what the Pope calls “social friendship”, a friendship that transcends borders. This inherent dignity, rooted in our origins in God, gives us mutual kinship.

Could we as a Church identify how to follow the Holy Father in promoting this social friendship? As an episcopal conference, you are acutely aware of the challenges and have addressed them, including migration, racism, abortion. But how could the response be more effective? What the Holy Father suggests is moving from seeing someone as a neighbor to viewing them as a brother or sister.

Thus, he proposes fraternity, not just as a human virtue but as a Christian virtue, which comes from recognizing that we are all brothers and sisters who have

God as our Father. At the core of Christian faith, witnessed in the lives of many saints, including that of Mother Teresa, is our response of love toward the least of our brothers and sisters. This will be the criterion of judgment at the end of time. Thus, the Holy Father challenges us to build fraternity through love.

How are we to do this? The letter *Samaritanus Bonus* states:

“The Church learns from the Good Samaritan how to care for the terminally ill, and likewise obeys the commandment linked to the gift of life: ‘*respect, defend, love and serve life, every human life!*’ The gospel of life is a gospel of compassion and mercy directed to actual persons, weak and sinful, to relieve their suffering, to support them in the life of grace, and if possible to heal them from their wounds” (CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, LETTER *SAMARITANUS BONUS*, 14 JULY 2020, 12).

The relief of suffering, the invitation to the life of grace, and the art of accompaniment are different forms of love, which the Church shows forth. Augustine says that if you have seen love, you have seen the Trinity. The Holy Father invites us to go forth just as Francis of Assisi went forth to meet the Sultan – unarmed, but clothed in the virtues of faith, hope, and, above all, love.

Christian love is not based on utility but gratuity. Many people say that migrants are not useful; that they drain precious resources or do not contribute anything to “our” culture. Others say that the sick and elderly are no longer useful; that their productivity and efficiency have declined; that their healthcare needs are too much, and that we would be better off without them, proposing to eliminate them rather than to offer them hope. We must resist with the power of love.

As a Church we can reaffirm the dignity of each person in imitation of Christ, who encounters man in need of salvation and cares for him with “the oil of consolation and the wine of hope”. Are we merely going to use the criterion of utility that the world offers or can we counter utilitarianism with the gratuity of love by “welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating” others into our society?

Dialogue: Proposing the Truth in Love

In a pluralistic, fragmented world, we are invited to dialogue. What is the method proposed in *Fratelli Tutti*? In chapter six, Pope Francis speaks of dialogue. But, when we speak of dialogue, what are we really talking about? It cannot be like those on the news who shout past each other, demonstrating that they are more

interested in power and their own ideas than the common good (*Fratelli Tutti*, n. 200). Dialogue must be related to the truth.

Pope Francis writes: “The solution is not relativism. Under the guise of tolerance, relativism ultimately leaves the interpretation of moral values to those in power, to be defined as they see fit,” continuing, “Is it possible to be concerned for truth, to seek the truth that responds to life’s deepest meaning?” (Cf. nn. 206-207.)

The Pope is convinced that dialogue is the best way to realize what always ought to be affirmed and respected, but it cannot “exclude the conviction that it is possible to arrive at certain fundamental truths always to be upheld” (n. 211). Discerning and acknowledging these truths and values makes for a “robust social ethics”. Authentic dialogue allows the Church to offer her contribution and to give living witness to Christ and the Gospel.

As the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world”, we must propose, inquire, and critique in light of the Gospel. What will be our proposal for “healing the world”? I think our proposal must necessarily involve compassion; social friendship; fraternity; and dialogue, with a deep commitment to resisting the throwaway culture and a utilitarian mindset. What role can the Church in the United States play in strengthening the bonds of the human family? Are we prepared to be a Samaritan Church, one which possesses a “heart that sees” and responds to the Lord’s call to compassion with His words, “Go and do likewise”?

Conclusion

My brothers, we are journeying together through very difficult times, enduring the coronavirus and a contentious electoral campaign. If we take a step back, we observe that society is in crisis. It is not merely that people are polarized or that the culture no longer supports the Faith; there is a genuine crisis of authority.

There is a lack of authority on the part of those who pretend to exercise power; a lack of trust and belief in those who are supposed to have authority, namely those in leadership; and manipulation by the press, which, at times, cares little for the truth but which erodes the confidence and trust of the people in the authority of the press. No one seems to be offering real values or solutions to bring about healing. These factors have created the crisis in both society and the Church.

In this context, we are called to imitate the example of Christ, the Good Samaritan. We are called to submit ourselves to Him and to follow Him, for it is He who exercised authority – not as power but as service. This is why they followed

Him. The words at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount are instructive: *Jesus finished this discourse and left the crowds spellbound at His teaching. The reason was that he taught with authority and not like the scribes* (Mt 7: 28-29).

Can we recover our authority and offer a proposal for healing the world? In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI said: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” Perhaps, the way we recover our authority is by witnessing to Christ, the Good Samaritan, who showed compassion and who exhorts us to “*Go and do likewise*”.

It is providential then that, just two weeks ago, Father Michael McGivney was beatified. Here we have the witness of a faithful priest, who understood the challenges of immigrants; the poverty of widows and orphans; and, the need for fraternity and unity. In the ministry of Father McGivney, we see a priest who used his authority wisely to animate the lay apostolate, with the Knights of Columbus, now boasting more than two million members and excelling in charitable works. His authoritative witness shows forth the face of a Samaritan Church, unwilling to pass by someone in need but willing to see where compassion is needed, and to act. There is a five-year old boy, who, through Father McGivney’s intercession was cured of fetal hydrops, and who can now look forward in hope to the life that lies ahead. May Blessed Michael McGivney intercede for you in offering to your flocks a witness to hope.

Thank you.