

Homily of Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio
President, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
November 13, 2023

So close to Veterans' Day I am reminded of a story from the WWII about two pilots: American and German, which was retold recently. Charles Brown, a 21-year-old from West Virginia was facing death. His plane could barely fly because it had been hit many times. One crew member was already dead.

A German Messerschmitt fighter plane was closing in, but its pilot, Franz Stigler, came from a vocally anti-Nazi family and he had even been in the seminary for a time. He was conflicted, one kill away from the Knight's Cross, but he could see the enemy's face. To kill them in that situation would be murder. They were helpless.

Fingering the Rosary in his pocket, he guided the enemy plane to the North Sea, saluted, and silently wished the crew luck.¹

Indeed, Franz understood the Gospel message of mercy and put it into practice even at the risk of his future and perhaps his life. His story of a lived faith from enemy ranks is one of many that I have discovered in the last fifteen years.

Living our faith, we open our plenary session in this historic basilica, home to so many meetings and councils of the vibrant Church in the United States. We have been inspired by the wisdom of Archbishop Sartain, even as we pray for increasing wisdom to respond to the challenges of our times. In addition to the quest for wisdom, we hear about the danger of scandal and the duty of forgiveness in the quest for reconciliation.

Even if we concentrate our prayer today for peace and reconciliation in a troubled world, it is so appropriate that our gathering opens on the Memorial of the first saint with the U.S. passport to be canonized. I have visited the birthplace of Saint Frances Cabrini at Sant'Angelo Lodigiano, Italy on several occasions and used to celebrate Sunday Mass for a student community of her sisters in Roma. It seems supremely eloquent that our first saint came over on a ship in the 19th century like many of our grandparents. She can only bless the tireless work to ensure a dignified welcome, which is a constant care of this assembly of bishops.

We recognize the importance of wisdom in our world which is drowning in information but struggling to find criteria with which to evaluate it. The Book of Wisdom was composed in Greek as if as a message for rulers, but the Jewish authors intended it for all who must draw on their gifts to lead an authentic and happy life. Wise is the just person. Only wisdom guides one to the fullness of life.

At the beginning of our plenary session we beg for wisdom, because we recognize that we are servants of the truth and charged to find ways to help those entrusted to our care welcome that

¹ Theresa Civantos Barber - published on 10/18/20 and updated for *Aleteia*.

truth, see its logic, and embrace the way of life that Christ holds out for us. We do so in many ways as we work in Synodal fashion to serve the Church in this part of the world.

Occasionally I think back to my three years in the Nunciature of Paraguay under the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner. There was a constant attempt to use the Catholic faith as a vehicle for protest, but there was also the quest to convince the faithful that the most effective way of preaching the truth was to find a way to make it welcomed. Rather than the baseball bat, effective use of honey might attract more. We are indeed in sales and have a great Person whose welcome into the hearts of those of our time we facilitate.

That Person, the Lord Jesus, uses strong words about scandal in the Gospel. The Catechism teaches us that “Scandal is an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his neighbor’s tempter. He damages virtue and integrity; he may even draw his brother into spiritual death. Scandal is a grave offense if by deed or omission another is deliberately led into a grave offense.”²

“Anyone who uses the power at his disposal in such a way that it leads others to do wrong becomes guilty of scandal and responsible for the evil that he has directly or indirectly encouraged.”³

So often we struggle to inform those entrusted to our pastoral care about evil and encourage them to flourish. It is not an easy task, because so many voices and blogs purport to have a monopoly on the truth. We perceive the delicacy of the present moment in the Middle East where we want to defend our elder brothers and sisters in the faith and decry the outbursts of antisemitism. At the same time, we recognize the right of the Palestinians to a homeland. The suffering and death of the innocent on both sides continues to horrify people of good will as well, as Pope Francis reminded us yesterday. We pray for world leaders that they might find solutions to bring peace to every troubled corner of the world.

In the midst of so much turmoil we try to walk the extra mile and to be patient with those who wrong us. That leadership is heavy and we depend on divine grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit to show us the right path. We might find some solace in the reflections of a Dutch prisoner at Auschwitz who wrote in her diary: “When I find myself in a corner of the camp, with my feet planted in your earth and my eyes raised up to your heaven, my face is often awash with tears, the only outlet of my interior emotion and of my gratitude....even at night tears of joy cover my face.”⁴

The opening prayer reminded us of the common origin we share and we continually try to remind everyone that humanity was created in the image and likeness of God. Before anyone is one nationality or another; one party or another; one opinion or another he or she is a child of God loved and created for eternal life by Him.

² CCC 2284.

³ CCC 2287.

⁴ ETTY HILLESUM. *Un itinerario spiritual*, pp.200-1.

As Pope Francis reminds us: “In the depths of every heart, love creates bonds and expands existence, for it draws people out of themselves and towards others. [65] Since we were made for love, in each one of us ‘a law of *ekstasis*’ seems to operate: ‘the lover ‘goes outside’ the self to find a fuller existence in another’. [66] For this reason, ‘man always has to take up the challenge of moving beyond himself’”.⁵ [67]

St. Frances Cabrini even obliged the poor to give from their poverty to help those more needy than they. It was also a way of insisting on the dignity of all and the common responsibility for others. It is a message that is very appropriate today and every day.

The two pilots saw beyond their uniforms and recognized their common humanity. The German saved the lives of the American crew. We pray that warring parties everywhere might acknowledge and respect the fundamental dignity of the human person and seek avenues that lead to peace. Charity demands our attention to the little ones, the weak, the simple, fraternal correction and unlimited pardon to those who ask.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* 88.