



Modesto: Popular Movements Regional Meeting

17-21 February, 2017, Modesto, California

I am delighted to join you today in this important gathering. It comes at a time of many challenges in this country and around the world. Fortunately we benefit from the great inspiration of the three World Meetings of Popular Movements to date. These annual events began in 2014 and reflect the vision and energy of Pope Francis. In his spirit of collaboration, I wish to begin by acknowledging the co-sponsors of this event:

- the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, especially its subcommittee currently chaired by Bishop David Talley;
- the PICO National Network;
- the Organizing Committee members and Advisory Committee who helped to plan this gathering;
- and our co-hosts: the Diocese of Stockton (Bishop Stephen Blaire); the Diocese of Fresno (Bishop Armando Ochoa); the Diocese of Sacramento (Bishop Jaime Soto); and Central Catholic High School.

Let me greet all my Brother Bishops here most warmly. Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has been supporting work for 45 years that promotes social justice and societal-level change. The poor and excluded have been at the center of this work, as Saint John Paul II recognized in 1979 when he noted:

The [Catholic] Campaign for Human Development has been a witness to the Church's living presence in the world among the most needy, and to her commitment to continuing the mission of Christ, who was sent 'to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives ... and release to the prisoners' (Luke 4: 18-19). I commend the bishops of the United States for their wisdom and compassion in establishing the [Catholic] Campaign for Human Development ... and I thank the whole Catholic community for the generous support given to this initiative during all these years.¹

¹ Providence of God Church, Chicago, Illinois, October 1979

That living presence in the world takes its cue from a document of Vatican II which began with these words: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted ...” (*Gaudium et Spes*, § 1). This is the starting point for each World Meeting and for this Regional Meeting of Popular Movements.

First, I am pleased to note your wider scope of interest. Like the first three World Meetings, your themes again include Work, Housing and Land, but to these you have added Migration and Racism; and it is worth noting that these themes were formulated already last year (2016), way before the US elections that brought the Trump Administration to power!

All the same, this theme is timely: Although Pope Francis exhorted the US Congress two year ago: “*You are asked to protect, by means of the law, the image and likeness fashioned by God on every human face*” (24/09/15), an astonishing level of hostility was displayed during the recent national election in this country. The scapegoating language has unleashed deep fears and anxieties among economically and racially excluded communities. Such rhetoric has the perverse power of provoking the very hostility that the speaker claims to guard against. And it is also more than mere rhetoric: the initial moves by the new administration to focus on excluding immigrants, refugees and the poor are rightly alarming.

Against these attitudes, all people of good will must rally to solidarity, that virtue, according to St. Pope John Paul II, that makes us commit perseveringly to the wellbeing of the other, and one of the great pillars of Catholic Social Teaching. Listen to the words of Pope Francis to the first World Meeting:

Solidarity means much more than an occasional gesture of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all take priority over the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means fighting against the structural causes of poverty and inequality; of the lack of work, land and housing; and of the denial of social and labour rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money: forced dislocation, painful emigration, human trafficking, drugs, war, violence and all those realities that many of you suffer and that we are all called upon to transform. Solidarity, understood in its deepest sense, is a way of making history, and this is what the popular movements are doing.²

² Pope Francis to First World Meeting of Popular Movements, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141028_incontro-mondiale-movimenti-popolari.html

The Holy Father went on to warn those who engage and witness to the true experience of the excluded that they will experience rejection: “No doubt this is because your voices cause embarrassment, no doubt it is because your cries are bothersome, no doubt because people are afraid of the change that you seek.” Human dignity must be at the core of the change you seek and must pervade the way you seek it:

This must be done with courage but also with intelligence, with tenacity but without fanaticism, with passion yet without violence. And all of us together, addressing the conflicts without getting trapped in them, always seeking to resolve the tensions in order to reach a higher plane of unity, of peace and of justice. We Christians have something very lovely, a guide to action, a programme we could call revolutionary. I earnestly recommend that you read it: the Beatitudes in Saint Matthew chapter 5 (cf. Mt 5:3) and in Saint Luke chapter 6 (cf. Lk 6:20); and the Last Judgment passage in Saint Matthew chapter 25. ... With these passages, you have the plan of action.³

Pope Francis returned to the inspiration of the Beatitudes for his New Year’s Day peace message, when he invited “the world’s political and religious leaders, heads of international institutions, and business and media executives, to apply the Beatitudes as they exercise their respective responsibilities. Lead your society, community or enterprise in the manner of peacemakers. Show mercy. Say no to casting people aside, damaging the environment, or winning at whatever cost.”⁴ Let me add: may all leaders hunger and thirst for justice.

Instead, we see far too much hunger and thirst for what? For money. Money and power, power and money. The idolatrous worship of money is the invisible thread binding so many of the world’s ills, because it takes precedence over the common good: “The service of the common good is left behind. Once capital becomes an idol and guides people’s decisions, once greed for money presides over the entire socioeconomic system, it ruins society, it condemns and enslaves men and women, it destroys human fraternity, it sets people against one another and, as we clearly see, it even puts at risk our common home, sister and mother earth.”⁵ And so, as Pope Francis exhorted the US Congress two years ago: “*Let us seek for others the same opportunities we seek for ourselves! If we want security, let us give security. If we want life, let us give life. If we want opportunities, let us give provide opportunities!*” For, “*Building a nation*

³ ibid.

⁴ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html

⁵ Pope Francis to Second World Meeting of Popular Movements, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html

calls us to recognize that we must constantly relate to others, rejecting a mindset of hostility in order to adopt one of reciprocal subsidiarity.” (24/09/15).

Three months ago, Pope Francis addressed the third World Meeting of Popular Movements. One of his major themes was fear and terror tied to the tyrannical idolatry of money:

And when that terror, which has been sown in the outskirts, whether by massacres, plundering, oppression and injustice, explodes in the centres with different forms of violence, even with despicable and cowardly attacks, citizens who still retain some rights are tempted by the false security of physical and social walls. Walls that enclose some and leave others out. Some citizens behind walls, terrorized. Others excluded, dispossessed, and even more terrorized. Is this the life that God our Father desires for his children?

Fear then is fed, manipulated... Because fear is not only good business for those who trade in weapons and death; it weakens us, throws us off balance, breaks down our psychological and spiritual defences, anaesthetizes us to the sufferings of others, and in the end makes us cruel. When ... we see the spread of xenophobia, when we realize that intolerant ideas are gaining ground, behind that burgeoning cruelty is the cold breath of fear. I ask you to pray for all those who are fearful. ... Mercy is not easy; it is no easy thing... It takes courage. That is why Jesus tells us: “Do not be afraid” (Mt 14:27), for mercy is the best antidote to fear. ... It is much more effective than walls, grates, alarms and weapons. And it is free: it is a gift from God.⁶

The Holy Father truly believes we can counter these forces at two levels. We must begin by rooting ourselves in in the challenges of our neighbors in their daily lives:

this is what enables you to practice the commandment of love, not on the basis of ideas or concepts, but rather on the basis of genuine interpersonal encounter. We need to build up this culture of encounter. We do not love concepts or ideas; no one loves a concept or an idea. We love people... Commitment, true commitment, is born of the love of men and women, of children and the elderly, of peoples and communities... of names and faces which fill our hearts. From those seeds of hope patiently sown in the forgotten fringes of our planet, from those seedlings of a tenderness which struggles to

⁶ Pope Francis to Third World Meeting of Popular Movements, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/november/documents/papa-francesco_20161105_movimenti-popolari.html

grow amid the shadows of exclusion, great trees will spring up, great groves of hope to give oxygen to our world.⁷

Second, we must analyze and address the systemic factors that lead to exclusion and oppression. Some of my friends have shown me analyses of systemic causes of poverty and racist exclusion in this country. I have learned how government policies and programs and business decisions can interact subtly, for example, in the real estate and housing business, to perpetuate isolation, poverty and hostility on racial lines, which can explode in a police shooting of an unarmed black teenager.⁸ Another example is the crying imbalance of educational opportunity on racial lines; as the nation's Bishops said a quarter of a century ago, "Inadequate education is one of the surest predictors of poverty, contributing strongly to intergenerational cycles of poverty."⁹ And so, why is it that in this age of computer science and algorithms some inner City schools are not taught algebra!

The Holy Father is sensitive to the great challenge of moving from analysis to action, and of the pitfalls:

As organizations of the excluded and many organizations from other sectors of society, you are called to revitalize and recast the democracies, which are experiencing a genuine crisis. Do not fall into the temptation of the straitjacket, which reduces you to being extras off-stage, or worse, to mere administrators of existing misery. In these times of paralysis, disorientation and destructive formulas, the active participation of peoples who seek the common good can triumph, with God's help, over the false prophets who exploit fear and despair, who peddle magic formulas of hatred and callousness, or a selfish prosperity and an illusory security.¹⁰

Pope Francis continually reminds the Church to *go to the peripheries* of human existence and embrace the excluded, the marginalized, those who are rejected and in danger of being discarded. He does this with more than words. Having seen the terrible misery and carnage of desperate refugees on Mediterranean shores, he has gone so far as to involve himself directly in the work of the Migrants and Refugees Section of the office that I lead.

⁷ Pope Francis to Second World Meeting of Popular Movements

⁸ The reference is to the August 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Richard Rothstein, "The Making of Ferguson: Public Policies at the Root of its Troubles", Economic Policy Institute, October 15, 2014. <http://www.epi.org/publication/making-ferguson/>

⁹ United States Catholic Conference, "Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation, and World", November 1, 1991. <http://www.priestsforlife.org/articles/1199-putting-children-and-families-first-a-challenge-for-our-church-nation-and-world>.

¹⁰ Pope Francis to Third World Meeting of Popular Movements

To conclude, I wish to invite you to read again Pope Francis' address to the US Congress on 24 September 2015. I wish also to remind you that in *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis quoted Dr. Martin Luther King Junior. May these words inspire this gathering:

When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system... Hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me back and so on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil.¹¹

Let me add, in the words of Pope Francis: "I ask you to continue combating fear by a life of service, solidarity and humility on behalf of peoples, and especially those who suffer most. ... And I insist that, against terror, the best antidote is love. Love heals everything."¹²

¹¹ Sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, 17 November 1957

¹² Pope Francis to Third World Meeting of Popular Movements