

HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
MONDAY OF THE 11TH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME, JUNE 19, 2017
CATHOLIC CHARITIES, USA

My brothers and sisters in Christ, it is a great joy to be with all of you at Catholic Charities. I wish to thank Sr. Donna Markham for her kind invitation and her leadership. As the Papal Nuncio, the Holy Father's personal representative in the United States, I extend to all present the warm greetings, paternal affection, and spiritual closeness of His Holiness Pope Francis. Thank you for all you do at Catholic Charities to build a culture of life, solidarity and welcome, especially for those most in need.

Today's Gospel is taken from the fifth chapter of Saint Matthew. Jesus went up the mountain, sat down, and began to teach his disciples, giving His Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes. He establishes Himself as the New Moses and in this section, He teaches with an authority greater than that of Moses, who gave the Law. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. He strengthens the Law and demands an interior change from His disciples. Making use of a rabbinical technique, known as an antithesis, he first proposes what has been said in the Law – *You have heard it said to your ancestors...* –, and then uses a characteristic phrase – *But I say to you...* – to show his greater authority. Jesus gives a teaching on His authority as God, the true Teacher, greater than the other rabbis and greater even than Moses.

In today's Gospel, Jesus begins with the Law of the Talion from the Code of Hammurabi – *an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*. This law suggests exacting revenge or at least meeting out justice. However, in the ancient world, it was largely used to limit excessive punishment. One could demand no punishment greater than the damage received.

Jesus wants his disciples to go beyond mere damage control. He has told them (5:20) that *unless their justice exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they shall not enter the kingdom of heaven*. Jesus demands more than simple justice, which means giving a person his or her due. Jesus calls His disciples to a radical love – to turn the other cheek, to give your cloak as well, to go the extra mile.

Thus, Jesus says, *But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your cheek, turn the other one to him as well*. The Lord who came into this world to conquer evil seems to be telling his disciples: 'Defeat evil by surrendering to it.' Isn't that cowardly? Wouldn't we just become accomplices of the Evil One?

This is not exactly what Jesus means or wants of his disciples. There is a difference between pacifism and passivism. The examples that follow (turning the other cheek, giving one's cloak and tunic, and going the extra mile) make it clear that far more courage and selflessness are required to be a disciple than to fight violence with violence, evil with evil.

The true battlefield, where violence and peace are engaged, is the human heart. Nonviolence and peace are not passive but active. Jesus Himself preached unconditional love, even of enemies. *When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn and offer the other one to him as well*.

Pope Francis suggests that violence and injustice must be countered with love and goodness. This active nonviolence is more than a mere political strategy; it is a way of life. In his *World Day of Peace Message*, Pope Francis provided a strategy for Christians – namely, making

non-violence a style for peace. There he noted that the proposed strategy for peace-building given by Jesus is the Beatitudes. By living the beatitudes, we become instruments of peace through “active and creative non-violence.”

The other examples beyond turning the other cheek are just as moving. Giving one’s cloak and tunic means willing to be stripped of things – or to offer them in true charity – for the sake of peace. Jesus expects sacrificial love from his disciples.

Going the extra mile, especially when we are tired, is difficult and demands patient endurance. Perhaps, going the extra mile will provide the opportunity to get acquainted with a person and to turn animosity into friendship. The extra mile provides time for that fruitful dialogue which involves being present to another and listening to their genuine concerns.

Today’s Gospel concludes with: *Give to one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.* Some might confuse your good works – giving to the poor – with mere social activism, but it is so much more. It is a manifestation of love in action. Pope Benedict XVI wrote that “love is, in the end, the only light which can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working.” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 16) As disciples and workers at Catholic Charities, your plucked cheeks, your sacrifices, and your tired feet are an eloquent witness of God’s love, which gives light to our world.