

HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR FRIDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT
ECCLESIAL GATHERING OF THE WAY FORWARD: LAUDATO SI' CONFERENCE
SAN DIEGO, CA
FEBRUARY 23, 2024

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is good to be with you during these days in which we focus on “protecting our common home and building our common Church”. I am grateful to the organizers of this conference, and to Cardinal McElroy, for their welcome. I am especially pleased to share this Eucharist with you, and in this context to convey to all of you the spiritual closeness and deep affection of Pope Francis.

The words of Jesus, which the Church places before us in this first week of Lent, are a return to the radical call of Christian discipleship. They summon us to the “surpassing righteousness” that is required for us to belong to the Kingdom of heaven.

To the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus, no one was more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees. But for those who would be a part of his Kingdom, their righteousness must be greater still. Let us be clear: To live this surpassing righteousness is the work of God; we are not capable of achieving such righteousness by our own efforts. The work that is required of us, however, is to conform ourselves to the “style” of God by becoming people of mercy. As Jesus makes clear in today’s Gospel, this means admitting our sinfulness and being reconciled with the people whom we have offended.

The Savior’s lesson in today’s Gospel could hardly have greater significance for us, who are living in a human society that is filled with accusation, mutual disdain, and blame. We could say: “Yes, look at how polarized our society is. Look at the culture wars. Look at the animosity in politics.” But to focus our attention outside the Church, and outside ourselves, would be to miss the target that Jesus is aiming at. In this Gospel passage, our Lord says: “Whoever is angry with his *brother* will be liable to judgment.... If you recall that your *brother* has anything against you.... Go first and be reconciled with your *brother*....”¹ By using the word “brother”, he is referring to people who are *fellow members of the community of faith*: in our case, fellow Christians, fellow Catholics. We don’t need to look far to discover those with whom we are called to reconcile. They are people who recite the same creed, who feed on the same Eucharist, and who inhabit the same world of Catholic intellectual discourse.

¹ Cf. *Matthew* 5:22-24.

It isn't hard to avoid sinful anger against those with whom we agree. But when it comes to those in the Church whose opinions infuriate us, whose priorities perplex us, and whose attitudes frustrate us – this is when we need the grace that comes with the Lord's call to conversion. Not that we have to give up disagreeing, or stop debating – sometimes with strong passion – about things that matter to the mission of Christ and his Church. But Jesus warns us to stop short of the *sinful* sort of anger which is in fact a kind of killing, and which he says will make us “liable to judgment.”² What he means is the choice to *despise a person* – to speak or to act toward a person in such a way that denigrates their dignity. This is what it is to “kill” from the perspective of God's Kingdom. The solution, says Jesus, is to reconcile with our brother or sister when we have “killed” in this way. To reconcile with someone is to raise that person to life again, and to be raised back to life ourselves. It is doing what God does.

As we are reminded through the Prophet Ezekiel, God does not “derive any pleasure from the death of the wicked.”³ If we are to be like God, then even when someone is in fact *wrong* – (and our judgment on this score must be very cautious) – even then, our desire for the person must be for their life and their joy. “The Lord's way is not fair!” we object.⁴ Yes, and thank God that he is not “fair” with us! Because, as the Psalmist sings: “If you, O Lord, mark iniquities, who can stand?”⁵ In other words, it is because of God's mercy that we live and have hope. It is because of his compassion that we can turn from sin and be saved. It is because of his tenderness that we have comfort and joy. If this is how he has treated us, then how must we behave toward the person with whom we are angry?

We are at this conference to discuss matters of moral importance with implications for the wellbeing of humanity and social relationships. Let us not forget the even more fundamental principle that Jesus points us to in today's Gospel: fraternal love and forgiveness, without which no other social good will have lasting meaning.

² *Mt* 5:21.

³ *Ezekiel* 18:23.

⁴ Cf. *Ez* 18:25.

⁵ *Psalm* 130:3.