

**ADDRESS OF HIS EMINENCE CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
“BRINGING THE LIFE OF CHRIST TO THE DYING:
FACING CHALLENGES IN END-OF-LIFE CARE”
NCBC TWENTY-NINTH WORKSHOP FOR BISHOPS
FEBRUARY 6, 2024, DALLAS, TEXAS**

Introduction: Keeping our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus

My Dear Friends 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 twenty-ninth workshop for Bishops, sponsored by the National Catholic Bioethics Center, addressing the theme of “Bringing the Life of Christ to the Dying: Facing Challenges in End-of-Life Care.” I thank Dr. Joseph Meaney, President of the NCBC, as well as the Knights of Columbus for their sponsorship of the event.

This is the first such event in a few years due to the pandemic and the lack of predictability of events. It is good to be together as we discuss a vital issue of our day: end of life care and preparing those under our care for an encounter with Christ who is the light of the world.

We have just celebrated the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. The Gospel of the Feast recalls Simeon holding the Child Jesus and declaring: “*My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.*”

Jesus brings light and salvation to an elderly man who had been promised that he would not see death until he had seen the Christ. In the Child, God drew near to this man who was nearing the end of his earthly journey. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori describes this encounter:

“Returning to old Simeon, it is extraordinary to see how the desire of his heart, the passion of his desire for salvation, when they meet their goal, the purpose so long awaited and desired, do not for an instant close up in a suffocating possession of the gift of God. On the contrary, they immediately reverberate in splendor ... This is the meaning of his entire life. Now he can die, not only because he was able to embrace the Christ, but because he was able to announce Him with a testimony that

was so powerful, so transparent, so humble and certain that it still reaches us today with the same intensity as on that day...” (MAURO GIUSEPPE-LEPORI, *OUR EYES ARE FIXED ON JESUS*, EXERCISES OF THE FRATERNITY OF COMMUNION AND LIBERATION, 2023, 24)

What may we learn here? One truth of the encounter is that death is not a final point in our life. It appears also as a gift that we might shine Christ’s light eternally through our journey into Paradise. The Preface for Christian Death captures this with *vita mutator, non tollitur* – life is changed, not ended. Death is not to be escaped but a mystery to be experienced as the journey to eternal life continues. We are called to accompany the dying to see the face of Christ whose perpetual light may shine on them for all eternity and which they can also reflect, expressing the beauty of God but in a unique and original way.

In virtue of our apostolic mission, we are called to accompany the dying and to mediate the closeness of Christ to the People of God. The Holy Father has stated:

“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” ... The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.” (POPE FRANCIS, *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 169)

The Holy Father wants you, as bishops, to be creative and faithful. Jesus is the starting point of renewal and healing our world. In an audience during the pandemic, Pope Francis called us to be like Simeon – to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus:

“The pandemic continues to cause deep wounds, exposing our vulnerability. ... Thus, we must keep our gaze firmly fixed on Jesus: in the midst of this pandemic, our eyes on Jesus; and with this *faith* embrace the *hope* of the Kingdom of God that Jesus Himself brings us.” (GENERAL AUDIENCE, 5 AUGUST 2020)

Bringing Christ to the Dying: Overcoming Isolation

The Pope believes that one of the greatest challenges to hope is isolation. In his most recent message for this year’s World Day of the Sick, the Holy Father noted:

“We were created to be together, not alone. Precisely because this project of communion is so deeply rooted in the human heart, we see the experience of abandonment and solitude as something frightening, painful and even inhuman. This is all the more the case at times of vulnerability, uncertainty and insecurity, caused often by the onset of a serious illness.” (POPE FRANCIS, MESSAGE FOR THE 32ND WORLD DAY OF THE SICK, 11 FEBRUARY 2024)

The ministry of “presence” is one way to resist the dehumanizing “throwaway” culture, countering individualism by remembering and reminding others that we are connected by our sharing in a common humanity, faith, and home. Saint John Paul II used the principle of solidarity to bring freedom throughout the world and to promote the civilization of love, in which every person, born and unborn, is valued. Pope Benedict XVI continued this in *Caritas in Veritate*, and Pope Francis is broadening the idea of solidarity to emphasize the need for love of neighbor, including the weak, vulnerable, the elderly and the dying.

Although Pope Francis has spoken of our common home in *Laudato Si* and, more recently, in *Laudate Deum*, he reminds us not only of our collective responsibility for the planet but also for one another, including the dying. It is not a mere question of ecology but one of “human ecology.” Our considerations must go beyond physical illness to another type of sickness - treating the world and people as “resources” or “commodities” to be used rather than to be loved.

Christ always treated persons as persons, to be loved, not objects to be used. But how can we bring His light to the dying? Of course, the easy answer is through our sacramental care. By ensuring that the faithful have adequate access to the sacraments of anointing of the sick, reconciliation, and viaticum. The Holy Father reminds us that “sin attacks persons and all their relationships: with God, with themselves, with others, with creation. Such isolation causes us to miss the meaning of our lives; it takes away the joy of love and makes us experience an oppressive sense of being alone at all the crucial passages of life.” (IBID.)

Spiritual remedies are entrusted to the Church to overcome sin and bringing interior healing. This requires encouraging our priests, but also the deacons and lay ministers who assist them, to renew their commitment and zeal to the sick for those who are not able to come to Church regularly. It demands attentive listening to understand what the spiritual needs of each person are so that he or she can be adequately prepared for the journey and so that people do not remain in isolation.

Bringing Christ to the Dying: A Samaritan Church defends Human Dignity

The larger question is: what type of Church do we want to be? It is most unfortunate that in recent ballot initiatives, the pro-life side has suffered defeats. There are many reasons for this, including vast sums of money spent by the forces of death, but perhaps one important reason is that the Church herself is perceived as being overly political and not compassionate. That is, there seems to me to be a serious gap between the institutional Church and the “charismatic” Church which must be overcome.

The same forces that promote abortion will use similar tactics to promote euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide under the guise of “choice” or “patient autonomy” or “dignity.” They will say that faith is a private matter and that the Church should stay out and keep quiet. To protect the inherent dignity of each person and to bring the light of Christ to the dying, something beyond the political is needed. While we can never be silent or remain indifferent, our actions must speak louder than words.

In concluding the Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2016, the Holy Father asked that mercy enter into the dynamic of the very way the Church lives. How do we show the tender compassion of God or of the Church, our Mother? The late-Cardinal Francis George believed that a great threat to the Church in the United States was the perception that it had become a cold, bureaucratic institution, with many no longer seeing the Church as a loving Mother. What image of the Church do we give? What type of Church does Christ call us to be?

In my judgment, the Holy Father believes that we should be a Samaritan Church. The 2020 letter *Samaritanus Bonus* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is worth exploring. There, we find many themes of Pope Francis – the necessity of the proclamation of the kerygma; accompaniment; resistance to the throwaway culture, and discernment. The letter itself emphasizes the kerygma: The Word was made Flesh. Christ suffered in the Flesh and rose in the Flesh, offering the hope of eternal life. This is the essence of Christianity.

While as a body, the American bishops identified the right to life of the unborn child as being “pre-eminent”, I draw attention to this document, because the throwaway culture is a true threat to the life of the elderly and suffering. Increasingly people are being valued for what they do rather than who they are. Here we touch upon a major theme for your reflection in these days: the subject of human dignity.

Today, the idea of *attributed* dignity is emerging and becoming more pronounced. This is the idea that values a person based on his or her attributes – looks, wealth, employment, power and influence, athleticism. When people age or begin to lose these attributes or abilities, including bodily functions, they express a loss of dignity, often accompanied by sentiments of not wanting to be a burden to anyone *and* requests for physician assisted suicide and euthanasia.

Amid great suffering, many fall into despair, but a Samaritan Church can offer hope, affirming the dignity of each and every 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”.

The Church proposes and defends the idea of the *inherent* dignity, valuing a person not for what he or she does or has, but for who each person is, independent of possessions or abilities. Each person is unique, irreplaceable and unrepeatable, willed into existence by God, made for love and to love. This principle that can never be sacrificed, even in a pluralistic society, for those who are elderly, suffering, or fast-approaching death.

While acknowledging the existence of intrinsically evil acts like euthanasia, *Bonus Samaritanus* pushes the Church beyond condemning evil to developing a “heart that sees” and acts with true compassion, which never involves eliminating people, especially the suffering and vulnerable, but rather demands accompaniment.

Bringing Christ to the Dying: Spiritual and Pastoral Accompaniment

This pastoral and spiritual accompaniment is broad in scope and includes those who are sick or who must confront the Mystery of Death; those who have lost hope amid suffering, so that they might have adequate palliative care, while being afforded hope; and those persons in a state of persistent unconsciousness, ensuring that they are not unjustly deprived of nutrition and hydration.

The accompaniment should engage not only the sick and suffering and their families, but also doctors, nurses, and healthcare providers, offering them the sure support of the Church as they share in Christ’s ministry of building the Kingdom of God. The document states: “Catholic healthcare institutions constitute a concrete sign of the way in which the ecclesial community takes care of the sick following the example of the Good Samaritan.” (CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, LETTER *SAMARITANUS BONUS*, 14 JULY 2020, 9)

Accompaniment also entails defending the dignity of conscience of healthcare workers, as well as providing for their ethical formation, rooted in sound principles which defend the dignity of the person. These sound principles are necessary to combat various cultural obstacles that promote the throwaway culture. Even today, the Holy Father warns:

“Old age and sickness are frequently experienced in solitude and, at times, even in abandonment. This grim reality is mainly a consequence of the culture of individualism that exalts productivity at all costs, cultivates the myth of efficiency, and proves indifferent, even callous, when individuals no longer have the strength needed to keep pace. It then becomes a throwaway culture, in which “persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when they are poor or disabled, ‘not yet useful’ – like the unborn, or ‘no longer needed’ – like the elderly. Sadly, this way of thinking also guides certain political decisions ... The abandonment of the vulnerable and their isolation is favored also by the reduction of healthcare merely to a provision of services, without these being accompanied by a ‘therapeutic covenant’ between physicians, patients and family members.” (POPE FRANCIS, MESSAGE FOR THE 32ND WORLD DAY OF THE SICK, 11 FEBRUARY 2024)

Catholic healthcare, in contrast, is never merely a providing of services; rather, it is compassionate care. And a proclamation of the Kingdom. Compassion is demonstrated by suffering with another person rather than abandoning, or worse, eliminating the other. Compassion filled the eyes of Christ and Simeon. Time and again, the Heart of Christ was moved with compassion for the crowds. Compassion is integral for building a civilization of love and confronting the forces of death.

My brothers, I invite you to reflect more deeply not only on the figure of Simeon, who kept his gaze firmly fixed on Christ, but also to reflect on Christ, the Good Samaritan, to discern what type of Church we should be. Near its conclusion, *Bonus samaritanus* 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.” (IBID., 12)

The document is an example of how the Church in the United States can be a Samaritan Church. In *Evangelium vitae*, Pope John Paul II used the story of Cain and Abel to ask, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer for every Catholic is a resounding *Yes*. Pope Francis’ encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, while referring to Cain and Abel (n. 57), explores the parable of the Good Samaritan, which illustrates powerfully how to live the value of fraternity. The Holy Father writes:

“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)

We must recognize our responsibility not 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). Amid a world of suffering, described by John Paul II in *Salvifici Doloris*, we are called, like the Good Samaritan, to become neighbors to others, especially the dying.

As bishops, we have a special responsibility to work with others to create a society which includes, integrates and lifts up the suffering (n. 77). Pope Francis reminds us that we live in relationships with others. The “other” is not my enemy but a brother or sister. He writes:

“No one can experience the true beauty of life without relating to others, without having real faces to love. This is part of the mystery of authentic human existence. ‘Life exists where there is bonding, communion, fraternity; and life is stronger than death when it is built on true relationships and bonds of fidelity.’” (IBID., N. 87)

The Pope adds that the words of Jesus “compel us to recognize Christ himself in each of our abandoned or excluded brothers and sisters. Faith has untold power to inspire and sustain our respect for others, for believers come to know that God loves every man and woman with infinite love and ‘thereby confers infinite dignity’ upon all humanity.” (n. 85)

Called to bring the life of Christ to the dying, we might ask: What role can the Church 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”?

It is both ambitious and courageous to commit ourselves to being a Samaritan Church, one which sees where compassion is needed and acts, so as to show forth the tender mercy of God and to bring Christ to the dying. May the Holy Mother of God accompany us and all the sick and vulnerable now and at the hour of our death. Amen. Thank you.