

Homily for National Day of Prayer for Peace in Our Communities
September 9, 2016
Feast of St. Peter Claver
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Today, as we gather to celebrate the Feast Day of St. Peter Claver, the patron saint of missions to black peoples, we do so in concert with the Catholic faithful across our country. As one Church, dioceses everywhere in the United States are marking this Day of Prayer for Peace in Our Communities as a catalyst for stronger engagement from Catholics in responding to division and violence in our communities. Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, explained:

In the days ahead, we will look toward additional ways of nurturing an open, honest and civil dialogue on issues of race relations, restorative justice, mental health, economic opportunity, and addressing the question of pervasive gun violence.

The Feast of St. Peter Claver is an exemplary moment in our Liturgical Year for us to embark upon this campaign. Reflecting St. Paul's own passion for preaching the Gospel, as described in his letter to the Corinthians, St. Peter Claver went to the ends of the earth to spread the Word of God. He left his homeland of Spain to be a missionary in the colonies of the New World. He sailed to Cartagena in Columbia and began his ministry to the untouchables of his time, slaves chained and herded out of Africa like animals. Over his 40 years of ministry, he preached the Gospel and personally baptized over 300,000 people.

But, let us remind ourselves just what this Gospel, that St. Paul and St. Peter Claver so passionately proclaimed, [what this Gospel] is all about. As St. Luke describes in his Gospel, it is the Reign of God “to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Lk. 4:18). The Gospel is a message that God is not indifferent to our daily sufferings. God really does hear our cries. It is the Divine Will that the life and dignity of every person be protected and celebrated. And, ultimately, it is the promise that, through our communion with Christ, our love of all people, and the grace of God, [there is the promise that] we are all to be the common heirs of eternal life.

Imagine the power that such Good News had on the hopeless and troubled lives of the slaves sought out by St. Peter Claver! Now, consider that it is our task to be the same healing balm to the wounded people of our day. Just like St. Peter Claver, but 350 years later, we are also commissioned to seek out and witness to this Reign of God – and not just to those close to us, but to everyone – and especially to those who yearn to hear the Good News. Often, these are the poor, the marginalized, those who have been set apart from the rest of society. And, echoing the words of St. Paul, “woe to us” if we do not proclaim the Good News to them.

Beyond marveling at the evangelistic zeal that St. Peter Claver had for the oppressed, however, we cannot overlook another critical lesson that his life illustrates. Let us contemplate for a moment, not only St. Peter Claver’s determination to preach the Gospel, but also the fact that a person so alien to the lives of the African slaves was even accepted by the slaves to begin with! How did he forge such relationships of trust and affection?

From the accounts of the manner in which he joined the slaves in the filthy and diseased cargo holds of the ships which brought them from Africa, we can only imagine that he had the disposition to humble himself and enter into the very lives and realities of those he served. Just as he offered his cloak to the slaves, their burdens became his burdens. Perhaps for many of the slaves, the tenderness of this Jesuit priest was the only experience of God's love that came to them from the cruel, slave-trading world to which they were subjected. People said "yes" to the Gospel because they recognized it in the very life of its messenger!

This method of evangelization is not just a historical best practice for us to consider. It is biblical, and it is the very nature by which the Gospel is to be proclaimed. St. Paul speaks of this very same, humble approach of relating to those of different backgrounds when he states that "I have made myself a slave to everyone ... I have made myself all things to all people." (1 Cor. 9:19-22) In other words, he has opened his heart to the life experiences of other people so as to know how the Gospel might best be spoken to them. Moreover, Paul recognizes that this is the only way that he himself might "have a share in [the Gospel]." Paul understands that he is not only delivering the Good News, but he is also being enriched by that same Good News as he ties bonds of love with those who listen to him! The Holy Spirit speaks the Good News to him through the very people to whom he ministers.

Today, across our nation, including in communities of our own Archdiocese, racism, poverty, tension and violence are far too prevalent. All these are signs that the Reign of God is having difficulty finding a dwelling place among us. And, even in those communities that might be

freer such unrest, a lack of empathy for other regions of the nation only feeds the injustice. So what are we, people of faith, to do?

Like St. Paul and St. Peter Claver, we respond with an untiring conviction to be signs of the Reign of God by humbly entering into one another's lives, especially those different from our own. As the Gospel today tells us, this becomes possible only when we "remove the wooden beam in [our] own eye." Jesus instructs us that its removal allows us to encounter others as they would like us to see them, without being enmeshed in our preconceived ideas about the color of their skin or the situation of their lives. How many of us, for instance, know what hopes and anxieties are shared around each other's dinner table? How are the lives of African-American families impacted when they have to worry about the lives and treatment of their children? How are the lives of immigrant families impacted when they have to worry about their acceptance into a new world? How are the lives of low-income families impacted when they have to worry about keeping food on the table? How is the life of a police officer's family impacted when they have to worry about the safety of mom or dad?

From whatever background we come, if we cannot begin to answer such questions, then we know we have work to do in building stronger relationships. This is the first step in combatting division and violence with the Good News of the Gospel and being a more effective instrument of that Good News. When issues of structural racism, poverty or violence are raised, whether we see these as passing headlines or situations that touch our hearts will depend upon whether we have followed the lessons of St. Paul, St. Peter Claver, and other such holy men and women.

This Day of Prayer challenges us to go forth with the courage to let down our guards and enter into conversations across racial, class and other lines of division. I urge all of us to forge new friendships, to sponsor intentional dialogues in our parishes and workplaces to address issues that divide us, to engage in larger conversations on these same issues in our communities, and to advocate for systemic changes that address these persistent threats to human life and dignity. This is how, as a Catholic community, we can preach the Reign of God to each other and how we can introduce the Gospel to the rest of our nation in these trying times. May God bless us in this endeavor of peace and unity.