

**Homily for the 52<sup>nd</sup> World Day of Peace  
January 1, 2019  
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**“Good politics at the service of peace” is the theme that the Holy Father has chosen for this World Day of Peace. I will not fault any of you if, at first glance, you happen to think that this title sounds a little contradictory. These days, we might not be accustomed to uttering words such as “good,” “service” and “peace” in the same breath as “politics.”**

**But, in of itself, politics is simply the organization of human power in our lives. Whether we are talking about high government officials negotiating between war and peace or people like you and me deciding who should sit next to whom at the Christmas dinner table, politics is about directing relationships to achieve an outcome. We all engage in it, and we all can make a difference in whether politics promotes peace or leads to greater discord in our relationships.**

**As we begin 2019, the Holy Father reminds us that we are marking one hundred years since the end of World War I, the bloodiest conflict humanity had ever known to that point. This year, we are also commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the most aspirational, global vision for human dignity humankind had ever agreed upon. World War I is a reminder that, in our most self-serving moments, politics can lead to the most gruesome results. The Universal Declaration on**

Human Rights reminds us that, in our best moments, politics can yield the most civilized and promising results.

Therefore, we welcome Pope Francis's encouragement to reorient our politics towards a greater purpose. He states, "If exercised with basic respect for the life, freedom and dignity of persons, political life can indeed become an outstanding form of charity" (no.2). Our Scripture readings this morning give us guidance on how politics should empower us to avoid the darker paths of selfishness and to promote a more charitable respect for life, freedom and dignity.

In our First Reading from the Book of Numbers, God tells Moses how the Israelite leaders are to govern His people. The reading is from a much longer section in which God is prescribing the laws to be followed and who is to apply them as they set out on their journey from Egypt to the Promise Land. We must remember that God's Chosen People were not only a Jewish faith community, they were a human community with a shared history, a common culture and their own system of power and leadership. With that in mind, God expects those in authority to execute the laws in such a way that the Israelites know that God "looks kindly upon them and gives them peace" (6:26).

It is especially important to note that the word we translate as "peace," is the Hebrew word, "shalom." To wish someone "shalom" carries a very sweeping significance. It includes wishing that person happiness, good health, prosperity, friendship, and general well-being. And, as we read time and time again in Scripture, God is particularly concerned that "shalom" is granted to

**the most poor and vulnerable among His people: the widow, the orphan, the stranger. God makes it clear to the Israelites that their treatment of their most vulnerable members will be a yardstick by which to measure how well they follow His laws and fulfill His Covenant.**

**If we reflect upon the details of the gospel account of the Nativity of Jesus, this same message is to be found. Looking up from the lowly innkeeper's stable to the world around them, Mary and Joseph would have found themselves in the shadow of King Herod's palace. Their child was born in a small corner of a vast empire. The Roman Empire kept a so-called "peace" through fear and superior force, and a Jewish family on the outskirts certainly was not supposed to matter.**

**We might imagine Mary and Joseph stepping out into the cold night, while their child was sleeping, and gazing up at that brilliant Star of Bethlehem. For them, it was a sign that a great king had been born, but they also had to understand the Messiah King sleeping in the manger was not destined to rule in the same manner as other kings. Contrary to the self-serving power of Caesar, who was completely indifferent to their struggles, the Christ Child was destined to build upon the Covenant that promised peace and dignity for all, especially bringing glad tidings to the poor.**

**Perhaps, on that night Mary and Joseph were contemplating the day when all the stars would align, when people like them would no longer be forgotten; the day when those who exercised power would set about building the peaceable Kingdom on earth as it exists in Heaven. The birth of Jesus pointed to a new type of politics, a politics of life, freedom, dignity and peace.**

**Whether we are talking about ancient Israel or the United States in 2019, “shalom” towards all, especially the vulnerable, is the duty of every follower of the Christ Child.**

**Today we are invited to call to mind all the modern-day widows, orphans and strangers, the lowly families whom God yearns to see benefitting from a politics of peace. We might recognize them as:**

- The unborn children who are entirely vulnerable to whatever decisions we make on their behalf;**
- Refugees who have fled gang violence and death threats in their homelands, hoping to find safety for their families;**
- Christians and other religious minorities in foreign lands targeted by terrorism and war;**
- The forgotten unemployed workers or struggling farm families, wondering if they will make ends meet;**
- The addicted whose lives might be spiraling out of control;**
- People of color who might not have a place at the decision-making tables impacting them;**
- The sick and dying who are made to feel like burdens on society.**

**We should ask ourselves, whenever these vulnerable populations look up from their places in life, what do they see? Do they see a politics of indifference? Do they see leaders who only look down on them as problems to contain? Or can they sense that their leaders are sincerely heeding God’s command to look kindly upon them and give them peace?**

Whether a refugee family in the desert or a laid-off worker in a jobless rural town, they all look up at that same sky Mary and Joseph did. It is not hard for us to imagine them hoping that the stars they watch will one day align, so that they might experience the well-being promised by God to His people.

Please know that I am not suggesting that the solutions to these struggles are easy. There are many, different and legitimate opinions about how to best promote human life and dignity. Only in Heaven will all human suffering be washed away. But the point of the Holy Father's message for the World Day of Peace is this: It is not only political leaders who are to strive to address human suffering. We must all selflessly place the peace and well-being of all people at the heart of our political discourse.

Unfortunately, it seems that this task is becoming harder and harder because we are living in an increasingly polarized culture. Whether it be because of race, geography, economic status, political party or creed, our culture is tempting us to draw more lines in the sand that divide the human family, defining new categories of "us" and "them." When we see immigrants, white people, black people, Christians, Muslims, Democrats or Republicans as a threat to what we are about, we make more "them" and fewer "us." We expand the distances between ourselves, and we make a politics of peace ever harder to achieve. To scapegoat any group, blame them for unrelated problems, or ignore their difficulties is always bad politics. It is always unacceptable for a people of the Covenant.

To truly promote a politics of peace, we need to disrupt this cultural trend. Pope Francis urges each of us to seek:

- *Peace with oneself, rejecting inflexibility, anger and impatience;*
- [to seek] *Peace with others: family members, friends, strangers, the poor and suffering, being unafraid to encounter them and listen to what they have to say; and*
- [to seek] *Peace with all creation... (no.7)*

There is no assurance that, a year from now, newspapers will tell us that 2019 was more productive in these matters than last year. However, we can be confident that, as a people of the Covenant and through the intercession of the Mother of God, we can be the ones that help turn the tide. Whether we be in lofty positions of power or not, we can all find new ways to overcome our differences and prioritize the lives, dignity, freedom, and well-being of all.

May God look kindly upon you and give you peace in this New Year.