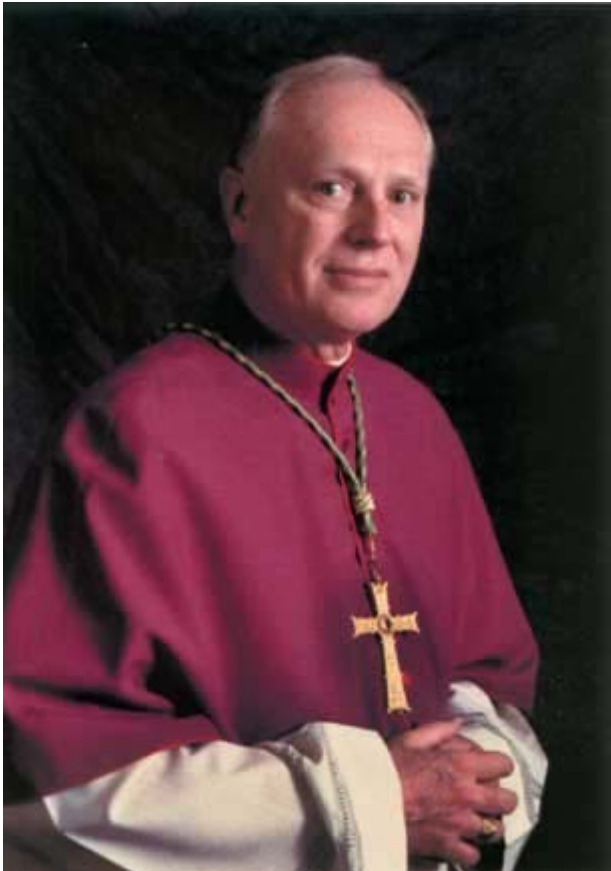


HOMILY  
SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT  
SOCIAL MINISTRY CONFERENCE  
WASHINGTON, DC  
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BISHOP HOWARD J. HUBBARD



In today's familiar Gospel we see that "Jesus took Peter, John and James up to the mountain to pray." It is the same trio whom Jesus also took with him into the Garden of Gethsemane. Thus, they who beheld his glory on the mountain peak would witness his agony in the Garden. Why? Because to endure the latter (his passion and death) his disciples needed to experience the former (the vision of his transcendent glory as a preview of his death unto resurrection).

As a preface for today's Mass puts it, "he revealed his glory to strengthen them for the scandal of the cross." But what about us; what vision, what transfiguration do we have to sustain us in hard times? Given the composition of this gathering, namely you who are engaged in the various social ministries of the church, I would suggest that we have the vision and the transforming message of the church's social teaching to guide and sustain us.

This teaching, and its practical application in service and advocacy, gives us a new way of seeing and a new way of behaving in this sin-wounded world of ours: where poverty and justice remain bitter fruits of our inhumanity to one another and of our failure to heed the call of Jesus to be meek, humble, gentle, poor in spirit, pure of heart, peacemakers and sufferers for justice sake; all of the things which the world around us considers to be utter foolishness but which Jesus reveals to be the way, the truth and the life. (Mt 5)

This social teaching of the church, emanates from the Scriptures and the church's reflection upon them down through the course of the centuries, culminating in the great social encyclicals from Pope Leo XXIII's *Rerum Novarum* to Pope John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae* and reflected as well in the teaching and pastoral documents of our own Bishops' Conference.

While this teaching is profound, complex and comprehensive, I would suggest it can be summarized in three fundamental values: first, every person has been endowed by God with a dignity that is unique, sacred and inviolable. This transcendent dignity of the human person is a profound religious truth that appears from the first chapter of Genesis to last line of the New

Testament. The defense of this human dignity has been and must continue to be the preeminent and perennial task of the church in its teaching and social witness.

Second, from this dignity there flow certain rights, the right to life and the right to adequate food, clothing, shelter, employment, education and health care opportunities for all people.

Third, there is a solidarity that exists among the members of the human family. For the human person is essentially a social being and human rights are rights held in community. We, therefore, must develop social structures and institutions which facilitate the achievement of these rights and which reflect the dignity of the human person. And it is the role of the government, and other mediating institutions within society, such as the church and its affiliated entities represented here this weekend, to effect those changes which ensure that the common good is promoted and that basic human rights are protected.

How timely is this vision of the church's social teaching about the dignity of the human person and the spectrum of rights and responsibilities that belong to a person simply because he or she is human, given the grave and spreading tendency that exists today to reduce the human person to the level of a thing, a pawn, a commodity, a unit of production, a mere instrument for social or scientific progress.

This dignity can never be explained in terms of any purely materialistic or atheistic construct but can only be perceived in light of a destiny that surpasses the limits of this world and that is rooted ultimately in a relationship with our loving God.

Further, this vision should lead us to be more determined in our quest for human rights and human dignity, more passionate in our pursuit of racial justice and social equality; more enthusiastic in our causes, and more humane and compassionate in our ministry of healing and reconciliation.

Moreover, it is only with this vision that the operation of a daycare center, the provision of affordable housing, and outreach to the poor, the sick, the elderly, the addicted, the mentally ill, the developmentally disabled, the incarcerated, the victims of HIV and AIDS disease, migrants and refugees make any sense. And it is only with this vision that our efforts can be raised from the level of the mundane, the self-serving, the paternalistic and the condescending to that transcendental level wherein our life and ministry truly become effective signs of God's healing and reconciling love.

In short, what I am trying to say, is that we engaged in the church's social ministry must understand and appreciate the golden opportunity we have to be instruments of God's healing and liberating love in a church, world and society which so desperately needs such and as part of a person-centered tradition that extends from the call of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures to care for the orphan, the widow, the stranger and the poor, to St. James' exposition to the early Christian community on the nature of selfless love, to contemporary icons like Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa, Archbishop Oscar Romero and Cardinal Bernardin who made a vocation of demonstrating the congruence of our catholic Christian vision of life with care and concern for the poor and the needy.

And this is the vision and tradition that you gathered here this weekend from Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Colleges and Universities, Catholic Healthcare, the USCCB Services for Refugees and

Migrants, Hispanics and Afro-American Catholics, and you who represent the Catholic Rural Life Conference, the Catholic Partnership for those with Disabilities, Round Table, the National Catholic Women's Association and St. Vincent DePaul Society must keep alive



and adopt to the ever-changing needs and social realities in our nation and world. In so doing you are truly beacons of light, anchors of hope, vessels of caring and instruments of justice and peace at a time when such is very much needed.

So I welcome this opportunity in my own name, and that of my fellow bishops, to thank you profusely for being

such heralds and bearers of the Good News, such faithful witnesses and audacious prophets who make this transfiguring social vision of the church a reality in our day.

Let me cite two ways in which the social teaching of the church can be transfigurations of human experience into the presence of God and the unfolding of Christ's kingdom of peace and justice.

The first is by our commitment to civility in advocating the social justice agenda of the church in the public forum.

The recent presidential campaign demonstrated there is great concern on the part of many Americans about moral values. But precisely what do we mean by this convenient catchall phrase moral values?

Are moral values only applicable to issues like same-sex marriage, embryonic stem cell research and abortion, or are not moral values also at stake in decisions about war, in drawing lines against torture, in addressing poverty and in providing desperately needed housing and healthcare for the least among us both at home and abroad? It is illustrative to note that for every injunction in the Scriptures regarding sexuality there are hundreds regarding care for the poor.

All of human life, not just sexual matters or personal behavior is shot through with moral and ethical issues.

However, as Peter Steinfels, the religion columnist for The New York Times, notes, "While it is necessary to enlarge the framework for the discussion of moral values, it is another thing to equate the so-called moral values voters with Jihad-driven Muslim terrorists or to imply that their concerns are merely a disguise for ignorance, irrationality and intolerance."

What is needed, I would submit, is civil and informed discussion on these polarizing issues. And who better should foster such a constructive dialogue than we from the faith community.

I emphasize this point because more and more in our contemporary church and society tolerance, moderation and a commitment to healing, reconciliation and the search for common

ground seem to be in short supply. This polarization is epitomized, I believe, by in-your-face journalism or by shock radio and TV hosts.

In varying degrees, we are all caught up in it. We have all been affected by and perhaps have contributed to the environment of anger, resentment and hostility that poisons the debate, polarizes the options and prevents us from finding real solutions to the problems that affect us. Consequently, we all have a stake in seeing that this assault on decency and fairness is met with a new civility.

Another key issue is how we in the faith community address moral values in the public arena?

In society, religious bodies are voluntary associations free to address the public agenda of our nation. More specifically, they are voluntary associations with a disciplined capacity to analyze the moral-religious significance of public issues.

Religion is a powerful ingredient and when introduced into the public debate it can prove devious, cruel and even fatal, as history can well attest. The religious thinker Blaise Pascal warned long ago, "people never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

Inclusion of explicitly religious moral values into the public debate, therefore, is admittedly a delicate and demanding task. As the late Cardinal Bernardin pointed out so wisely in an address on religion and politics: When speaking in the public forum we from the faith community bear a twofold responsibility: to keep the moral factors central to the public debate and to set an example of how this can be done with sensitivity, rationality and courtesy. To rise to this double challenge, we must meet two tests: competency and civility.

Regarding competence, we in the religious community must meet the same standards of rational argument and evidence as any other participant in the public debate. Our religiously rooted positions must be translated into the language, arguments and categories that are truly public, that is, open to rational examination and debate and assessable, understandable and hopefully persuasive both to co-religionists and to citizens of whatever background.

Moral values which are derived from beliefs which cannot be submitted to examination by public reason are essentially private morality. If enough people who shared that morality are mobilized, it can score victories in the public arena. But every such victory is a setback for a public ethic. Our impact in the public arena, then, should be in direct proportion to the cogency of our argumentation. To exercise moral authority in a pluralistic society, in other words, must necessarily be by way of persuasion, not coercion.

Standards of competence, however, are not enough. As members of a faith community we have a special responsibility to be concerned about the tone, style and quality of the public debate. We must demonstrate pragmatically that we can keep our deepest convictions and still maintain our civil courtesy; that we can test others' arguments but not question their motives; that we can presume goodwill even when we disagree strongly; and that we can relate the best of religion to the best of politics in the service of each other. Hopefully, then, this will be our goal at this critical juncture in American history.

And, secondly, we in the religious community must come to the public debate as people of faith and prayer. I mention this, stress it and underscore it because of my 41 years of priestly

and episcopal ministry I have observed so many people well motivated and well intentioned in their desire to do good and to be of service to others who quickly become discouraged and disillusioned because in placing all emphasis on human measures and natural solutions they forget that first and foremost they are called to be believers: believers in someone and in something, namely Jesus Christ and his Good News.

When this happens, they quickly drop by the wayside or move on to other pursuits because they find themselves bringing up the Lord to others but only their own ideas, values and ideals which cannot withstand the test of time nor endure the heat of day, and finding not the Lord in others but only petty, weak human being like themselves who quickly sap their strength, harden their hearts and dampen their spirits. That such occurs is not surprising because God has revealed and history has taught us repeatedly that without trust in God and reliance on Divine Providence our lives become like a ship without a rudder or a car without a motor. Service and advocacy without prayer, in other words, can become very humanistic and very secularistic, geared to make things more comfortable and palatable here and now but failing to point to that eternal now to which each of us is destined.

Service and advocacy without prayer only creates a false sense of security rooted in the fickle and fleeting ideas, values and movements of human wisdom but failing to communicate that life-giving power and strength that only comes from trust in the Lord God and the Good News revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Karl Rahner, arguably the greatest Catholic theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, put it this way, "There is only one road that leads to God. It is prayer. If someone shows you another, you are being deceived."

The secret of all secrets, then, is that our social justice ministry must be grounded in prayer. For the extent that our lives are rooted in deep intimate personal relationship with the source of all life through our personal and communal prayer, to that extent can we be convincing without being arrogant, able to confront without being insensitive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and authentic role models and witnesses without being manipulative.

So it is my hope that civility and prayer will be the hallmark of our efforts to advance God's transfiguring kingdom of peace and justice in our day.