

THIRD WEDNESDAY OF LENT
2008 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering
The Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill, Washington
Wednesday, February 27, 2008
Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski, Bishop of Orlando
Celebrant and Homilist

Promoting Life and Dignity, Justice and Peace

I am happy to be here with you this morning – I apologize for being a little late in getting here. You see I was supposed to preside at this Mass last year. But weather kept me on the ground in Orlando.

In several interventions during recent years, Pope Benedict XVI has offered a concise definition of the secularism that threatens our global society today. He said that secularism means simply the attempt to organize society – and to live – as if God does not matter. Of course, a world that would organize itself without God ends up by organizing itself against itself. It also ends up being a pretty hopeless place – as Benedict says in his latest encyclical: a world without God is a world without hope.

The witness of the Christian today is to witness to hope – and we can do this by simply modeling what life looks like, what life can look like when we live as if God does matter. And, because God matters, we are called to model a life in which man matters as well. If God matters, man must matter. For As John Paul II said in *Ecclesia in America*, Jesus Christ is the human face of God and the divine face of man. For this reason, our witness necessarily involves commitment and work for Justice and Peace, to promote human life and dignity.

Archbishop Joseph Hurly was the visionary bishop of St. Augustine over 50 years ago when the St. Augustine diocese included the whole state of Florida. He used to say: the Church must do good; and the Church should be seen as doing good.

The Church owes all of you who are engaged in the various aspects of social ministry a real debt of gratitude for your witness– you make the Church look good. And you make the Church look good by doing good: promoting life and dignity, justice and peace. Your “daily bread” is to do in the name of the Church what Pope Benedict writes about in *Deus Caritas Est*. In paragraph 28, he reminds us. “The Church is duty bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically”. Your witness proclaims: man matters.

“Man” and this is to be understood in its widest and most inclusive sense as encompassing male and female), “man”, Pope John Paul II insisted, “is the way of the Church”. And thus, the Church properly analyzes issues for their social and moral dimensions – anything regarding the human person and his dignity is certainly within the purview of the Church who rightly measures public policy against gospel values. This is not “meddling in politics” but a service of love – and to fail to speak with courage and coherency would be to fail in the charity we owe our neighbor.

Of course, that does not mean that our “service of love” is always welcomed – or understood by our fellow citizens. Nor does what we offer necessarily fit in anyone’s preconceived ideological box. In today’s political climate – with its sharp partisan divisions, Catholics can feel – and perhaps we should feel – politically homeless. The words of GK Chesterton when he described the political situation of his native England also describe our own political landscape today and the difficulty of our identifying with any particular party’s platform or agenda. He said: “the progressives (what we would today describe as liberals) want to keep on making mistakes and the conservatives don’t want to fix the mistakes already made.”

Our critics will say that we are seeking to impose our views – but to quote John Paul II again: the Church does not impose, she proposes. We engage in the public square because we are convinced that we have something to contribute, we have a proposal to make about what is needed for the flourishing of the human person in society.

We have something to say, we have a word to share, that word – of course – is Jesus. One of the main themes of the Second Vatican Council – a theme that is developed in the magisteriums of both John Paul II and now Benedict XVI – is that in Jesus Christ, because he is both true God and true Man, we find not only the truth about who God is; we also find the truth about who man is – who we are – what is our dignity – what is our destiny.

This week, Cardinal Bertone, the Holy See’s Secretary of State, is in Cuba. The Cardinal is there to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the late Pope’s historic visit to that island nation. In the past 12 years I have traveled to Cuba many times – mostly to support the work of *Caritas*, the social ministry arm of the Catholic Church in Cuba. Cuba up until recently was an officially atheist state – now it calls itself a “lay state”. In Cuba, you can see what Benedict said about “a world without God is a world without hope”. For the average Cuban – especially among the young – hope means leaving the island. What little of civil society that exists in Cuba today exists thanks to the efforts of the Catholic Church – and *Caritas*. And if Cuba is to find its way as it transitions to a post-Fidel era, so that young people can realize a future of hope without emigration, the Catholic Church there will have to play a major role. John Paul II went to Cuba as a messenger of truth and hope and that what the Church in Cuba – the Church any

where – has to be: a messenger of truth and hope. That pretty much defines Catholic social ministry and Faithful Citizenship, doesn't it?

I cite this because I remember, a few years ago, Cardinal Ortega of Havana gave a paper at a Church meeting in Puebla where he spoke quite frankly about the difficulties that Cuban society faces today. He had no illusions that the long awaited "transition" will be an easy one. He observed that Cuba seems to be moving from an ideological materialism – represented by Marxist-Leninism – to a practical materialism, one that we are well acquainted with in our own consumer culture.

Speaking of the difficulties the Church experienced (and still experiences) – the limitations on her rights, persecution (he himself spent some time in a "re-education camp", intimidation, discrimination, etc., he noted that the communist really did not oppose the Church because of what she said about God. Trinity, Eucharist, Marian piety – none of these things really bothered the communists. The problem the communists had with the Church is not about what she said about God; but with what she said about man, about the human person. And as one moves from ideological materialism to practical materialism, that's not going to change – in Cuba or anywhere else.

And we know that ourselves in our society. When The New York Times criticizes the Catholic Church – just to offer an illustration - it is not about our God talk but about our Man talk. They argue with us – not about the Trinity but about the human person. We hold that man is a creature made in the image and likeness of God, the only creature God made for himself so that he might share with Him eternal life. That we are created for more than just to die is the root of our hope. We believe that man is open to Infinity, that his life and his dignity transcend this life. We believe that man matters.

Because man matters, our man talk is important. Reductive anthropologies are responsible for the crisis of hope that afflicts our modern societies – and the social ills of our times, whether we speak about abortion, promiscuity, drug abuse, the breakup of the family, these social ills are symptomatic of this crisis of hopelessness. When you think that you or that your neighbor just don't matter then why even care about peace and justice?

The Compendium of the Church's social doctrine is dedicated to the proposition that man matters. Indeed, the entire body of Catholic Social Teaching, with foundations in Sacred Scripture but also accessible to human reason, is a reasoned dialog on why this is so. Now these teachings sometimes can appear to be quite complex – and the arguments very difficult. (I know that some have suggested that reading through a papal encyclical can be a good cure for insomnia.) However, I suggest that all the Church's social doctrine can be summarized in one simple phrase: no man is a problem. No man is a problem. Any anthropology that would reduce the human person to being just a problem is

simply a defective, an erroneous anthropology – unworthy of man created in the image and likeness of God.

When we allow ourselves to think of a human being as a mere problem, we offend his or her dignity. And, when we see another human being as a problem, we often give ourselves permission to look for solutions. The tragic history of the 20th Century shows that thinking like this even leads to “final solutions”.

This is why Catholic social teachings proclaim a positive and consistent ethic of life: no man is a problem. For us, Catholics, therefore, there is no such thing as a “problem pregnancy” – only a child who is to be welcome in life and protected by law. The refugee, the migrant is not a problem. He may perhaps be a stranger but a stranger to be embraced as a brother. Even criminals – for all the horror of their crimes – do not lose their God-given dignity as human beings. They too must be treated with respect, even in their punishment. This is why Catholic social teaching condemns torture and works for the abolition of the death penalty.

In Christ, to recall what Pope John Paul II said, we see the divine face of man and the human face of God. That God became man in the Incarnation explains why in Catholic social ministry we do what we do – and why what we do has such the broad scope that it does. As our Scripture readings today indicate: Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. In him as last Sunday’s second reading reminded us we find a hope that does not disappoint. He is God’s last Word. This Word – and never ideology or partisan posturing – is at the root of our Catholic social ministry for this word became flesh of our flesh, he suffered and died on the cross: because every man, every human being matters.