



THE DIOCESE OF LAKE CHARLES

Bishop Provost's Lenten Pastoral

First Sunday of Lent
February 10, 2008

My dear People of God,

The two most powerful sentences in any language are "I love you" and "I forgive you." They are perhaps so powerful that they intimidate us, and we seldom hear them or speak them. Yet, our Lord Jesus used them frequently and taught us how packed with meaning they are. The two truths they express, love and forgiveness, are the basis for the Sacraments we celebrate as Catholics.

I think of the "New Commandment" our Lord Jesus taught us in the Gospels. At the Last Supper in the Gospel of St. John, Jesus will soon enter His Passion. The Father's will is being carried out. At this critical moment, Jesus says to His disciples, "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (John 12:34). Why is this a new commandment? Jesus had in fact already given a commandment of love. We find it, amongst other places, in the Gospel of St. Matthew, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). This commandment of love is universal. Anyone could embrace it as a way of living in harmony within the human family. This "new" commandment of love, to love one another as Jesus has loved us, is specifically Christian. A Christian is called to imitate the love of Jesus, and Jesus loves us to death. As St. Paul will write in Galatians, "I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). This love of Jesus overflows into the sacramental life of the Church.

The overflowing merits of Jesus Christ are shown particularly in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus forgave and commanded us to forgive. Jesus taught it in the Sermon on the Mount. "Be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:24). Jesus exercised the Father's forgiveness to such an extent that many criticized him. "Who but God alone can forgive sins?" (Mark 2:7). How can a mere human forgive sin? How can anyone exercise the prerogative of God? However, not only does Jesus, as the Son of God, forgive sin, He extends the power of that forgiveness to His followers. It happens in the Gospel of St. John.

As recorded in the Gospel of St. John, Jesus appears the first time to His disciples on the night of the first Easter Sunday. His first words to them are, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19). It is an exceptional moment. Jesus then says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). He breathes on the disciples, an obvious reference to the work of the Spirit, and says, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (John 20:22-23).

The powerful statement, "I forgive you", is intended to be heard. The woman caught in adultery and the paralytic on the mat heard the words of forgiveness. Tax collectors, sinners, and the "good thief" on the cross - all heard the words of forgiveness. The power of

forgiveness is not to remain imagined. If the ears of the disciples are blessed "because they hear", then we as disciples must hear as well (Matthew 13:16). Forgiveness must be expressed. For this reason, St. James exhorts us, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). The Church follows that instruction. Not only must the individual Christian forgive those who give offense but also the Church must forgive in Jesus' name. If God forgave in Jesus Christ, then that same forgiveness of Jesus must continue through the work of Christ's Body, the Church. As St. Paul so eloquently writes, "He is the head of the body, the church...For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him" (Colossians 1:18-20).

And so we, as Catholics, come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. With contrition, true sorrow for sin and a purpose of amendment, we come to the Sacrament of our encounter with a forgiving Lord. The priest is that instrument, that minister, set aside by his ordination to speak the words of forgiveness and to represent all those whom we have offended. "I absolve you," he says, and we rejoice in God's grace of reconciliation. We are not alone. We are reconciled within the Body of Christ, the Church. We are the lost sheep who have been found, and "...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance" (Luke 15:7).

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a sacrament of comfort and healing. It is an extension of the Lord's mercy to us for the sake of redemption. We should not avoid it. We need to hear those words, "I forgive you." Then, perhaps we can better speak them to one another.

During this Lent, I ask you to renew your appreciation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Let us hear "I love you" expressed in the words, "I forgive you." Take advantage of the times offered for this beautiful Sacrament. Never hesitate to request it from your beloved priests. May that grace of forgiveness flow abundantly into you and overflow into your lives as Christians. May we both receive and communicate forgiveness.

With prayers for a blessed Lent, I remain

Devotedly yours in our Lord,

+Glen John Provost
Bishop of Lake Charles

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The Rev. Henry Mancuso, right, Secretary of Pastoral Services of the Diocese of Lake Charles, stands with Mrs. Carolyn Fernandez, left, Director of Catholic Charities of the Diocese at a recent press conference regarding the link between poverty and racism and to begin working to address those intertwined problems.

Poverty, racism must be addressed jointly

LAKE CHARLES - In a national report recently released locally Wednesday, Jan. 23 through Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Lake Charles it was noted that 37 million people in this country lived below the poverty level in 2006. The report also indicated a definitive link between poverty and racism, according to Rev. Henry Mancuso, Secretary for Pastoral Services of the Diocese. The report, by Catholic Charities USA, entitled "Poverty and Racism: Overlapping Threats to the Common Good," was announced Monday, Jan. 21 in Washington, DC.

"We cannot responsibly address the issue of poverty without addressing the impact of racism on poverty; in reality I will propose, the two - poverty and racism - are intertwined," Father Mancuso said at a press conference held at the Chancery Building of the Diocese. According to the report, the poverty level was calculated as a family of four living on \$20,000 per year. Between 2000 and 2004 the number of people living in such straits increased by 5.3 million, according to Father Mancuso.

He also noted that "racism is a system of racially conferred - and denied - privilege, advantage, benefits, and status. Racism today remains what is has always been: a defense of racial privilege, such as majority or white privilege in the United States."

Nearly two out of three families with incomes below the poverty level include one or more workers. There are more poor white Americans, but the percentage of nonwhites who live in poverty is higher: African American, 24 percent; Latino, 21.8 percent; and Native American, 23.2 percent. White families' net worth is normally 10 times that of people of color.

"Generations of one group of people created wealth for generations of another group of people without much benefit for themselves," Father Mancuso said. When white families were creating a wealth for themselves and their descendants, Black families were being left out. This is no little matter.

The Catholic Church's history is not one of inclusion either, Mancuso pointed out.

But in keeping with the church's "moral theology," Father Mancuso said when "injustice is done, it must be repaired, and social harm calls for social relief."

Father Mancuso called for a radical mental change within the community, which he hopes solves the problem of poverty and racism.

In keeping with the need to work to minimize and work to eliminate both poverty and racism, a course of action was presented.

- A February 16 meeting of Catholic Charities staff with representatives from each of the 38 parishes of the Diocese to begin a process of education, awareness, and collaborative action.

- A Meal Against Poverty program, which will bring together people of goodwill.

- Desire to team with and work with social, government, and religious agencies to address these issues and needs locally.

- Form consciences in faith to assist those in need.

- Recognize that faith-based groups cannot replace governmental responsibilities because they lack resources and personnel. Work to pilot programs that can later be incorporated into public sector programming and to provide analysis of the effectiveness of government programming on the local level.

- Educate young people to the situation that "no diploma" + "teenage pregnancy" = poverty

- Focus on underperforming schools
- Offer fair and clear information on "pay day loans" and "rent to buy" programs, both forms of predatory lending.

- Provide more assistance in affordable housing.

- Ensure that men and women leaving prison are ready to earn a living and create dignity

- Support progressive affirmative action.

Act to alleviate the inequities that result from the present structures. For example, providing remedial education, job training, aggressive recruitment and removing racial-based disadvantage.

Working poor, homeless are challenging problems

LAKE CHARLES -- Providing help to the working poor is one of the most challenging problems facing Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Lake Charles, according to Carolyn Fernandez, Director of the Office. Mrs. Fernandez joined with the Rev. Henry Mancuso, Secretary of the Ministry of Pastoral Services for the Diocese, in announcing a report from Catholic Charities USA regarding poverty in our country and community at a recent press conference.

She shared with the group a "real life crisis from a real life family." The example was a single mother with two children working fulltime above minimum wage. She makes \$9.89 an hour and her employer gives her about 35 hours a week.

Her approximately \$1,600 per month salary, before taxes and normal expenses, does not stretch very far, Mrs. Fernandez noted. In fact, it turns into \$549 for child care, groceries, car insurance, gas, and any other incidental expenses that might come up during the month. "It doesn't work, it doesn't work at all," Mrs. Fernandez said. "She came to us for help with her rent, but that is a one time thing. We can't help her every month, but every month though she's facing a crisis,

if she is unable to get enough hours at work or something happens to her car. What is she supposed to do for extra money to repair that.

"We have countless examples, but this is the one that really stuck out to me," Mrs. Fernandez continued. "I know she is struggling and trying to get as many hours as her employer will allow her but it's still not solving the problem for her."

Mrs. Fernandez also spoke about the homeless of the area, many of whom are suffering from mental illness, who come to Catholic Charities for help.

"We have several homeless people who come to us for help," Mrs. Fernandez said. "Mental illness affects a number of people who are homeless. We give what assistance we can, but there needs to be greater system support to get them into housing, to help with treatment for mental illness, for medication costs because that is a tremendous part of it."

Mrs. Fernandez pointed out that within the homeless in the area, there is a leadership structure.

"Several months ago, when the weather began getting cooler, I began worrying about the weather being about the group," she continued. "I began calling around the area trying to

find a bed for him and when I did, I got so excited. But, when I told him about finding him a place to stay, he said, 'he couldn't do it'.

"When I asked him why, he came up with so many different excuses, I realized that his homelessness is by choice, really," she said "But it is also affected by the mental illness. He is not able to make the right choice for himself."

The fact that the man disappeared for a while was a concern, making her fear she might have scared him off by offering him shelter.

"I thought maybe he thought when he turned us down (for the shelter) that we would not help him any more," she said. "After a couple of months, though, he came back very excited because he said he had a "village" of people that he was trying to help. Now he has become a "captain" of this group of homeless people and teaching the ropes for what it means to be on the street and living homeless.

"It's an unfortunate reality but it is what he is doing. We are helping in the way that we can, in the way they will allow us and the way they will accept. It is a harsh reality though."

Did you know...

The Rev. Whitney G. Miller was the first priest ordained for the Diocese of Lake Charles. Bishop Jude Speyrer ordained Fr. Miller on June 6, 1980 in Our Lady Queen of Heaven Church. He currently serves as Secretary for the Ministry of Christian Formation of the Diocese and as Director of Diocesan Counseling.

The Very Rev. Daniel Torres, pastor of St. Henry Parish, currently serves as Vicar General while Deacon George Stearns is the Chancellor. Bishop Speyrer appointed two priests to be the first Vicars General and another to be the first Chancellor when the Diocese was established in 1980. Do you know who those priests were?

January 40-Hours Devotion sites, times

- Our Lady of LaSalette, Sulphur**
Thursday, Feb. 7 at 6 p.m. to Saturday, Feb. 9 at 12 noon
- Our Lady of LaSalette, DeQuincy**
Saturday, Feb. 9, Sunday, Feb. 10, 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. each day
Monday, Feb. 11, 1 p.m. to 10 p.m. ;
Tuesday, Feb. 12 to Thursday, Feb. 14,
1 p.m. to 6 p.m. each day
- St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, Carlyss**
Wednesday, Feb. 20 at 9 a.m. to Thursday, Feb. 21 at 8 a.m.
- Our Lady of Prompt Succor, Sulphur**
Thursday, Feb. 21 at 9 a.m. to Friday, Feb. 22 at 6:30 a.m.
- Immaculate Conception, Maplewood**
Monday, Feb. 25 to Thursday, Feb. 28, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. each day.
- St. Philip Neri, Kinder**
Monday, March 3 at 6 p.m. to Wednesday, March 5 at 10 a.m.
- St. Joan of Arc, Oberlin**
Thursday, March 13 at 8 p.m. to Saturday, March 15 at 12 noon.
- Our Lady Help of Christians, Jennings**
Tuesday, March, 25, 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.
- Immaculate Conception, Jennings**
Wednesday, March 26, 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.
- Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Jennings**
Thursday, March 27, 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

(This page paid for by the Diocese of Lake Charles.)