

Facing the Crisis: A Catholic Offer of Wisdom and Courage to Congress

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, January 21, 2019

On this Martin Luther King Day, we remember the teaching of this nation's most prophetic peacemaker who said, "*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.*" Inspired by Dr. King, we declare that this is a moment of moral crisis in the United States. As national and international Catholic organizations, we feel compelled to address the political polarization that is eroding our democracy. The habit of inflicting suffering on some for the supposed benefit of others is all too common in both our political discourse and policies today. We wish to share this message with Catholic members of Congress, as well as with members from other faith and humanitarian traditions, at this critical time when the integrity and viability of our democratic institutions and traditions are at stake.

We encourage members of Congress to look to the words of Pope Francis as a source of wisdom for addressing the challenges of modern society. In his historic address to the Congress on September 24, 2015, the pope offered a positive message and a clear call to all involved in the political process: "*Building a future of freedom requires love of the common good and cooperation in a spirit of subsidiarity and solidarity ... The contemporary world, with its open wounds which affect so many of our brothers and sisters, demands that we confront every form of polarization Our response must instead be one of hope and healing, of peace and justice.*"

Now, we call on each member of Congress to gather the wisdom and courage that is needed and break free of the division and polarization that grip our nation. To achieve such a transformation of hearts, we offer our reading on the following six signs of the times.

Political Virtues and Vices in the Shadow of a Nation in Crisis

How we organize our society – our economics and politics, our laws and policies – directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. We ask members of Congress to remember that a basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. The first order of business is to take a long, hard, and honest look at the current state of affairs. In his 2019 World Day of Peace message, entitled "Good Politics is at the Service of Peace," Pope Francis offered these cautionary words:

"We think of corruption in its varied forms: the misappropriation of public resources, the exploitation of individuals, the denial of rights, the flouting of community rules, dishonest gain, the justification of power by force ... to which we can add xenophobia [and] racism, lack of concern for the natural environment [and] the plundering of natural resources for profit, and contempt for those forced into exile."

Border Security and Immigration Reform

What is the just and responsible way to address border security and immigration reform? Our Catholic tradition invites and challenges us to see the face of Christ in every immigrant and refugee mother, father and child. We particularly need to address the root causes of immigration, such as poverty, direct violence, and the role of U.S. policy. As Pope Francis said in his address to Congress:

"We, the people of this continent, are not fearful of foreigners, because most of us were once foreigners. I say this to you as the son of immigrants, knowing that so many of you are also descended from immigrants We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation. To respond in a way which is always humane, just, and fraternal."

Racial Justice and Voter Suppression

The life and dignity of the human person is at the heart of Catholic social teaching. Human life is sacred and the dignity of the person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. The willingness of Congress to address criminal justice reform is a step in the right direction, but much more needs to be done to achieve racial equity in the United States.

People have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially poor and vulnerable people. Voter suppression laws strike at this tenet by denying that right

to those who are disproportionately poor, especially African American, Native American, and Hispanic American communities. Catholic social teaching also mandates that we provide opportunities for quality education, affordable housing, and access to adequate health care for communities of color who call the United States their home.

We also call attention to Pope Francis' historic statement last October rejecting the death penalty in all instances, especially since it disproportionately affects people of color, people who are poor, and persons with intellectual disabilities or severe mental illness.

Climate Change and Care for the Environment

Every day we are faced with the existential threats of global warming and climate change: destructive hurricanes, rising sea levels, severe droughts and wild fires. In his 2019 World Day of Peace message, Pope Francis laments the *"lack of concern for the natural environment and the plundering of natural resources for the sake of quick profit."* We cannot ignore the reality of climate change and the scientific evidence of its human causes. The environmental challenge poses fundamental moral and ethical dilemmas, especially since those living in poverty and future generations bear a disproportionate share of its consequences. We have a particular obligation to children, something Pope Francis calls "intergenerational solidarity," to address climate change. We are called to protect our people and our planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation.

Nonviolence and an End to War and to the Strategy of Fear

Finally, we must address the pandemic of violence and war that is sweeping the globe: from gun violence in our city streets to our support for war in distant lands.

Ending the scourge of violence requires both deep wisdom and courage. In his 2017 World Day of Peace message "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace," Pope Francis noted the historic contributions of Dr. King and other courageous peacemakers, and affirmed the urgent need to cultivate the power of active and creative nonviolence as a response to the deadly violence manifest throughout the world today:

"This 'piecemeal' violence, of different kinds and levels, causes great suffering Violence is not the cure for our broken world The decisive and consistent practice of nonviolence has produced impressive results I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence."

The experience of the past two years only reaffirms the need to move boldly and courageously to nonviolent solutions to domestic and global conflict and violence. Dr. King taught us that acting nonviolently in our words and actions is the way to redemption and lasting reconciliation.

Good Politics at the Service of Justice and Peace

In conclusion, we urge you, as faithful Catholics and citizens of every faith and humanitarian tradition, to affirm our common responsibility to promote the dignity of every person and to work for justice and the common good. As Pope Francis said in his 2019 World Day of Peace message, *"Political office and political responsibility constantly challenge those called to the service of their country to make every effort to protect those who live there and to create the conditions for a worthy future."*

We are bound by a common hope, based on our faith and the democratic traditions we share, that together we can turn away from the division and polarization that plague our political discourse and process. Find courage in the words of Dr. King: *"Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."* The fate of our democracy, as well as our planet and future generations, depends on it.

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