



We Are Called to be a Church, a People of and for the Poor

Ralph McCloud, Executive Director of the USCCB's Catholic Campaign for Human Development, was the guest speaker at the Office for Catholic Social Justice Ministry's 46th Annual Dinner and Awards event on October 21, 2014.

A transcript of his remarks is printed here.

I am honored to be here with you tonight. It is always a pleasure to get out of Washington and be among folk, away from the polarization and bureaucracy, and to be with people in the trenches, in the vineyard with folk like yourselves who have answered Pope Francis' call to make sure that no one is a "left-over."

Tonight I was given a perplexing question to talk about: Pope Francis' call for us, very early in his Papacy – and his exact quote was: "We are called to be a church, a people of and for the poor."

I have wrestled with this, and I am sure that many of you have, in that we often wish to have a church that, if not one that is prosperous or wealthy, at least one that is doing ok. Seldom do we strive to have a church that is poor; far too often we want to make sure that our church is NOT poor.

After thinking about it, I have come up with what I feel are three characteristics of a church that is poor and for the poor. There is nothing magical about my list, and I would invite you to create our own thoughts as to how we can better heed the call and serve the needs of others.

Three Characteristics of a Poor Church that is Concerned for the Poor

1. Christ at the Center!

Christ has to be at the center! I feel that a church of the poor and for the poor focuses on the one who reminded us of what it is like to be poor, what it is like to be a migrant, what it is like to be imprisoned, what it is like to be hungry. Focusing on him allows us to see not just his poverty, but also his love and concern for the poor – and how he places the poor as a priority. He goes to the temple and unfolds the scroll and proclaims:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.

The same Spirit, the same anointing, encourages, inspires, urges and emboldens us to do the same, to free persons captive to poverty, hurt, pain and probably more importantly, exclusion. Christ time and time again brings folk back into wholeness, back into completeness and back into their communities.

Christ at the center means that we look to him to see how to care; to see how to love; to see how to be brother and sister in a way that is genuine and real.

Christ at the center invites us to become poorer ourselves so that we can see better the poverty of others, to respond in a compassionate way.

2. Evangelistic

A church that is a people of and for the poor is evangelistic. It goes out into the world with Good News. It goes into a world in desperate need of some good news, not just the news from the scroll; it goes into communities where we might not feel comfortable or safe. To be a poor church, one must feel pain, hunger, the cold of winter and the heat of summer – not as a daily exercise for oneself, but to appreciate the want and need of others and, in leaving our own comfort zones, we keep Christ at the center, we are never fearful, and in fact become closer.

In *Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World)*, we read:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.

That be us!

A church that is poor and for the poor sets aside the madness of the day and sees folk where they are and who they are – not judging, not assessing their worthiness or merit, but rather seeing the hand of God in that person on the corner. Oh, you know the corner – all cities have them – the corner where the homeless and the hungry gather looking for assistance. You know the one, where the Loews or Home Depot is, where folks gather outside looking for daily work – not to save up for their vacations, but rather to sit down and to eat that day with their families; or the corner where young people languish, hanging out, not looking forward to bright futures but hoping to just make it through the day. Or the corner where the pay day lenders are, the ones families go to when they are struggling and the greedy lender lends money, expecting a rate of payback at sinful rates. Studies show that the average family who makes trips to pay day lenders will visit these places nine times in a year, never getting out of debt. We all know the corner.

A church that is poor and for the poor knows where these corners are, and will act on what they see and hear there – in a sense drawing the element of struggling families into their community, not as a project done for Christmas, but rather allowing the presence of the poor to make the community just a little bit poorer – in essence, working to become a church that is poor.

I am reminded of my own upbringing, not rich or privileged by any stretch of the imagination, but in a sense blind to the needs of folk around me, and how a Gospel response had been drilled into me by my elders. They were always teaching about sharing, about caring and doing it all for the glory of God, but we did not know, we did not understand who the poor were even in our own neighborhoods. Every Christmas my grandfather would proudly proclaim how we would care for the poor and hungry in our community, and what that translated to was going to the pantry and finding random items to donate to a food drive or a holiday basket.

I am also reminded that, despite being in this ministry for years, I too can be blinded or jaded until I go to the place where the pain is. Recently I spent some time in Ferguson, MO and frankly, it wasn't much different from many communities where there are disparities of education, of health care, or employment. When jobs are few and transient, case after case shows folks renting in lower income communities where tax bases are low and educational opportunities are few. This visit was to Ferguson, but it could just as easily have been Selma, southern Arkansas, northeastern Kentucky, or Fargo, ND.

I thought I knew what was going on, and in many settings I gave my opinion and thoughts about the tragic situation there, and I offered brilliant solutions and thoughts. But it wasn't until I went and sat with community leaders, parents, children, seminarians, until I heard their stories, ate with them, and worshipped with them, that my narrative changed. I saw neighbors who were now pitted against each other despite living side by side for years. I saw Catholic Charities agencies, an archbishop and seminarians trying to see how they might be engaged. I listened in parishes to stories about the difficulty of ministering to hurting folk with Humvees and military troops outside their doors. I heard little children asking when they could go to school again, and why everyone seems so mad. And a mother asked, "Why did my child have to lay in the middle of his neighborhood street for 4 hours?"

Tough questions, and I found out in very short fashion that I didn't have the answers, but I continue to want to delve more into the hard questions involving race and economics, lack of employment, and family and education and Being invited there was an invitation for me to change my smell and my sense of smell.

You see, Pope Francis has another popular expression, inviting people, particularly those in ministry, to "be shepherds with the smell of sheep." This is another hard analogy to comprehend. But it was finally after my childhood experience of going down to personally visit Ms. Jackson in St. Louis, that both I and my crusty old grandfather were able to understand, to see and perhaps even smell better, even if not more aromatic.

Recently, speaking in his native Spanish, Pope Francis thanked folks gathered for the Catholic Charities USA meeting and told them that, like the Good Samaritan and the Innkeeper in the Bible, "we are called to be in the 'streets,' inviting and serving those who have been left out."

3. Finally, Investing in a Unified Community

Over 2000 years ago, Christ came so that all can be one. And we have done so much to create silos, barriers and boundaries that keep us from being family.

We experience deliberate distractions and divisions by some who would wish to alienate – deliberate, but not always malicious. Pope Francis invites us to look at the poor and at poverty as a poor person, or with the eyes of poverty, and not from abundance; to humanize the poor, and analyze what makes them poor and , in their poverty, what makes us poor.

An African saying goes: “I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am!”

We are invited to see those struggling as families, **our families**, not able to feed, educate – or having to depend on others, even government; not having all the answers or knowing what questions to ask; saddled with unending uncertainty.

I have been blessed to see folk who come together, put aside petty differences to create unified communities of faith and love; folk who left their comfort zone; folk with Christ in the middle, with the desire to invest in a unified community.

Pope Francis also says that the church ought to be like a field hospital. When I first read this, I thought field hospitals bind up wounds, deal with the critical issues and deal with the cholesterol later – and that he is calling us to an emergency response and at the same time reminding us that we can’t do it all. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus makes a point of giving us the coordinates – the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, dangerous and winding, dark. The parable invites us to take Christ’s place in helping the stranger, and coming back to check on him.

A unified community realizes that the closer we are to one another, the closer we are to God. We are creating a community worthy of God’s masterpieces, dignified and sanctified from conception to natural death. And in this community we would treat one another as we treat masterpieces, defending, protecting, safeguarding – loving, nurturing, caring for and acknowledging the pain of common wounds, so that when pain happens, we all feel it.

Instead of approaching life from the 30,000 foot level of ideas, Pope Francis invites us to experience the life of everyday and real people. His pithy phrase in *The Joy of the Gospel* says it all: **“Reality is greater than ideas.”** My staff often patronizes me because I can be somewhat of an idea person only – I know that when they say, “that’s a good idea” there will come a “but” after it. Their jobs call them to be in the field more than I, hence they smell a whole lot more like sheep than I do. Often times we are “stuck in the realm of pure ideas,” thus disconnected from realities. Ideas are important as they can classify and define, but realities call us to action.

Finally, with Christ at the center, evangelization becomes second nature, and communities naturally become united. United communities have a boldness to dream, not just for their children, but for the children of generations that follow, to value what happens to the futures of our sacred descendants and our world. When community is valued, differences aren’t deficits and diversity is appreciated as a gift from an awesome and all powerful God, and gives witness to the magnificent wonder of God, who can create this beautiful tapestry of humanity in His image and likeness.