

Rooted in Faith – Building One Human Family
Second Annual Bishop Peter Rosazza Social Justice Conference
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It is a distinct honor for me to offer this keynote address at the Second Annual Bishop Peter Rosazza Social Justice Conference. For the past seven years I have worked for Bishop Rosazza and all the other bishops of the United States, but I have admired him and his work for justice and peace for many decades, especially when I worked for his friend, Bishop Walter Sullivan, the Bishop Emeritus of Richmond. Bishop Rosazza and Bishop Sullivan frequently championed the causes of poor and vulnerable people and the cause of peace. It is fitting that this Conference honors Bishop Rosazza's mission and work.

It is also a distinct pleasure for me to return to the Archdiocese of Hartford. I lived, studied and worked in the Archdiocese of Hartford in the seventies when John Whealon was the Archbishop. It is good to return to experience the continued vibrancy of the Church of Hartford under the leadership of Archbishop Henry Mansell.

I look back with very fond memories on my years at Yale Divinity School, a time when I worked as an outreach worker to the elderly in local housing projects and as an intern assisting with religious education in a local parish in Woodbridge.

My life-long career in lay ministry began here in the Archdiocese of Hartford when I spent two exciting years working full-time as a religion teacher at Northwest Catholic High School in West Hartford. I loved being a teacher because you got to know some wonderful young people and you got to challenge them and be challenged by them as we explored how to live out our Catholic faith in the world today.

I will never forget when we did a unit on faith and its call for us to visit the sick and the elderly. I was confronted by one of the young women in the class who had recently lost her grandmother. She made an impassioned plea for us, as a class, to adopt a nursing home. After getting the necessary permissions, that is exactly what we did and we were faithful to the commitment, regularly visiting the residents of the nursing home, perhaps bringing a little joy to their lives and receiving twice more in return.

One of my extracurricular tasks at Northwest Catholic High School was to be the Director of Social Action. And did the students act. In addition to visiting nursing homes we organized days of awareness on global poverty, provided Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners and gifts for

scores of local families, and volunteered in soup kitchens and local programs that served children in poor neighborhoods. I remember my greatest challenge was to keep up with the enthusiasm and energy of the students (and to find freezer space for scores of frozen turkeys before each holiday!).

I share something of my years here, not just to let you know this is something of a homecoming for me, but because these stories illustrate the theme of our Conference: “Rooted in Faith—Building One Human Family.” Faith drew me to the Archdiocese, first as a student of theology and then as a teacher of religion, but that faith was not a solitary experience. It inevitable, inexorably, drew me into relationship with others, students, parents, teachers, and especially poor and vulnerable people with whom I doubt I would have had a relationship, except through the communion of faith. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was “rooted in faith, building one human family.”

And this is not only true for Church workers. It is true for all believers who build the one human family in their everyday lives as parents, students, workers, owners, voters, investors, and consumers. All of our actions can help strengthen the one human family. And I’ll let you in on a little secret. The more we are pulled by faith into building the one human family, the more we grow ourselves.

In this talk I will do three things:

1. The bulk of my talk will explore the theology underlying the reality that we are one human family.
2. I will explore the theological challenge of “building” one human family.
3. And finally I will describe a concrete way that we can advocate for building one human family.

I. We are one human family.

Genesis and the creation story teach us that the human person is created in the image of God. But the story also teaches us that we were created to be in relationship with one another. “It is not good for man to be alone.” “Male and female he created them.”

The Good News of the Gospel is that in Christ God has taken on our humanity and offered every person salvation. The question is not "Are you saved?" The Good News is that we are saved! The challenge is to live lives of gratitude for all God's goodness and love.

Human worth is intrinsic, built into the fabric of human life by God. Our basic human dignity comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment.

But human dignity can be realized and protected only in community. The scriptures present a thoroughly social vision of humanity. God does not call us merely as individuals without relationships and mutual responsibilities. In the scriptures God called the ancient Israelites as a people, a community, a nation, God's own people.

Ancient Israel developed a whole body of law to protect human dignity:

- laws protecting migrants, widows, orphans and debtors;
- laws promoting just judgments, especially for the poor;
- laws governing fair commerce and protecting laborers; and
- laws providing for the needs of poor persons.

The ancient Israelites, under the inspiration of God, remembered well their own poverty and oppression in Egypt and worked to fashion a just society. But, like us, Israel was not always faithful to the call for social justice. The Hebrew prophets remind us that nations are judged by the measure of their justice as a society. Isaiah decried Israel's unfaithfulness to their covenant with God.

"Woe to those who enact unjust statutes and who write oppressive decrees, depriving the needy of judgment and robbing my people's poor of their rights, making widows their plunder, and orphans their prey!" (Is. 10:1 2)

Jesus preached and inaugurated the Reign of God, a social image and reality. And Jesus founded the Church, a community; he didn't write a "self-improvement" book. He did not offer merely individualistic "personal salvation." He taught us to pray to "our" Father. Our relationship with God is profoundly personal and profoundly social at the same time. This is why the cross is such a perfect image for our faith; it symbolizes the unbreakable bond between our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationship with others.

The early Church carefully structured its communal life to meet the needs of all. During this Easter Season, the Church's lectionary reminds us of this fact. In Chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles we read:

"They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need.

Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising

God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” (2:42-47)

Doesn't it sound like the early Christian community was living the reality that they were one human family?

We are social beings. Human dignity and potential are only developed through social interaction. Our language, thought patterns and abilities are developed through social immersion. A whole host of social institutions exist to express human dignity and promote human development: schools, hospitals, the arts, government, transportation, businesses, health clubs, etc. Social laws, structures and institutions have a deep impact on human development and dignity. Access to society's institutions is essential for persons to develop their full human potential.

Human dignity is defended and fostered in community at many levels. The family or household is the basic cell of society, the basic community. These communities of intimacy (family and friends) are the basis for truly human social life. Family or household members have the right and responsibility to contribute to the broader communities of society.

What cannot be accomplished at the most basic levels of society to defend and promote human life and dignity must be done at higher levels. And higher levels should not interfere or supplant, but rather support, the basic levels of society—the family, local associations and communities. This is the principle of subsidiarity.

In the biblical and Catholic social vision, government has a responsibility to look after the "common good" of all. As Pope Leo XIII taught in his encyclical, *On the Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum, 1891)*: “The state must never absorb the individual or the family, both should be allowed free and untrammelled activity so far as it is consistent with the common good and the interest of others....” (# 521) But rather in the words of Blessed Pope John XXIII in *Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra, 1961)*: “The State ... should safeguard the rights of all citizens, but especially the weaker, such as workers, women and children. Nor may the State ever neglect its duty to contribute actively to the betterment of the living conditions of workers.” (# 20)

Our social policies and institutions today carry enormous moral significance. As the bishops asserted in *Economic Justice for All (1986)*, the central tests of all political, cultural, economic and social institutions are:

- What do they do to people?
- What do they do for people?
- How are people given access to them?

Or in other words, do they contribute to building one human family? Do they enable every person to develop his or her God-given potential?

II. Now let's explore the central theological challenge of "building" one human family.

To examine this question, I'd like to borrow and adapt an example that I first heard from Jack Jezreel, the founder of JustFaith. Imagine a family of five, a mother, a father and three children. The family is planning to go on vacation when the youngest child comes down with the high fever and is lethargic. What does the family do? Do they go ahead with their vacation and leave the youngest child behind? Do they limit the time, attention and resources that they will devote to the sick child because they want to be fair to their two healthy children? Or do they rush to the doctor and give the sick child all the time, attention and resources she needs, postponing the trip?

We all know how we would deal with this situation in our own families. The challenge is how do we deal with this question in the one human family. This is where the Catholic social teaching principle of the option for the poor comes in. All members of society and society as a whole have special obligations to poor and vulnerable persons.

God's covenant with ancient Israel included a special concern for poor and vulnerable persons. This concern found expression in their communal laws:

- laws protecting aliens, widows and orphans (e.g. Ex. 22:20 23; Lev. 19:33; Dt. 24:17 18);
- laws protecting debtors (e.g. Ex. 22:24 26; Lev. 25:23 25; Dt. 15:1 11; 23:20 21; 24:6, 10 13);
- laws promoting justice, especially for poor persons (e.g. Ex. 23:1 3, 6 9; Lev. 19:15 16);
- laws mandating gleaning of the fields for poor persons (Lev. 19:9 10; Dt. 24:15 16); and
- laws providing for the needs of poor persons from a communal tithe (Dt. 14:28 29; 26:12 15). In a sense these last two laws were the first primitive social security system.

It was Israel's own experience of Egyptian oppression that left a deep impression on them. In Deuteronomy we read: You shall not defraud a poor or needy hired servant, whether one of your own people or an alien. You shall not violate the rights of the alien or of the orphan or widow. For, remember, you were once slaves in Egypt, and the Lord, your God, ransomed you from there (paraphrase of Dt. 24:14, 17 18). Even in ancient Israel immigrants had rights. When Israel did not live up to the spirit and letter of these laws, prophets arose to defend the rights of the poor.

Jesus had a special regard for poor and outcast persons. They were the most receptive to his teaching. In the memorable image of the final judgment the king separates the sheep from the goats based upon their treatment of the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community (the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the immigrant, the naked, the prisoner, the sick). (See Mt. 25:31-46.)

Jesus understood his own mission in special relationship to poor and outcast persons. At the beginning of his public ministry he announced: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor....” (Luke 4:18)

The measure of the justice of a society, the measure of building one human family, is how those who are poor or vulnerable are faring. The Church makes a fundamental "option for the poor." This option does not mean pitting one socioeconomic group against another. Meeting the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society strengthens the whole community and insures that all are protected. Poverty destroys human potential and impoverishes the whole community.

As Pope Leo XIII wrote in *On the Condition of Labor* (Rerum Novarum, 1891): “When there is a question of protecting the rights of individuals, the poor and helpless have a claim to special consideration. The rich population has many ways of protecting themselves, and stands less in need of help....” [# 54]

Or as Pope Paul VI put very poignantly in *On the Development of Peoples* (*Populorum Progressio*, 1967): “The world is given to all, and not only to the rich. That is, private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditional right. No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities.” [# 23]

But there’s another central challenge to “building one human family.” Our family must be broadened to include God’s family. We are called to solidarity and peace with all peoples near and far.

The Church speaks of a “universal common good” that reaches beyond our homes, our communities, and even our nation’s borders to the global community. We are one human family regardless of national, racial, ethnic, economic or ideological boundaries. The scriptures tell us that we are one human family, sons and daughters of a loving God. And we are called to share the resources of the earth with the whole human family.

Global solidarity expresses the Church's concern for world peace and international development. Solidarity links our fates to the fates of nations in a web of interrelationships.

And just as parents don't like to see their children fighting, God doesn't like to see us fighting. He desires peace for us, and peace for nations. Throughout the scriptures peace is proclaimed as God's gift to us. Peace is also announced as God's challenge to us. Christ is our peace. And "peacemakers" are blessed.

In Catholic teaching peace and justice are linked; in fact they are reciprocal. Injustices lead to war; and the arms race leads to poverty and injustice. In the famous admonition of Pope Paul VI: "If you want peace, work for justice."

As significant as the gap is between rich and poor in our own country, it is dwarfed in comparison to the gap between developed and developing nations. Pope Paul VI called development the new name for peace. In *On the Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio, 1967)*, Pope Paul challenged us: "We must repeat once more that the superfluous wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations ... Otherwise their continued greed will certainly call upon them the judgement of God and wrath of the poor." [# 49]

And building one human family cannot ignore the environment in which we live, which all in the one human family share. We must care for God's creation if we are to care for one another. Humans are part of creation itself and whatever we do to the earth we ultimately do to ourselves. We are earthlings.

The story of creation affirms the beauty and goodness of all of creation. Genesis also makes it clear that we do not own the world. God does. Ultimately, we are stewards charged with managing and caring for God's wondrous creation.

The human person and human society do not exist in a vacuum. Our link to the earth is symbolically expressed in Genesis. Humans are made of the "clay of the earth" into which God breathed life and love. If we pollute the earth, we pollute ourselves. The destiny of the one human family is bound up with the ecosystems of our planet.

Pope Benedict XVI has explored the profound link between how we treat people and how we treat the earth. A society that finds people disposable, finds the earth equally so.

In *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) Pope Benedict XVI taught: "*The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa.*" This invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style, which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences. What is needed is an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of *new life-styles* "in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which

determine consumer choices, savings and investments'. Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society." (#51)

In other words, we are one human family and building one human family requires a concern for ecology.

God calls us to live in community as one human family. For human beings, life is life in community. There is no other way. The fullness of human life can only be found in community.

III. Finally, I promised to describe a concrete way that we can advocate for building one human family.

Our nation is facing unsustainable future deficits; it is critically important for our future and our children's future that we exercise fiscal responsibility. But how we reduce future deficits is equally important. We must be fiscally responsible in morally responsible ways.

In the coming weeks, Congress will continue to debate deep spending cuts in the federal government's Fiscal Year 2012 budget. Bishop Stephen E. Blaire, the Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, and Bishop Howard J. Hubbard, Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, have written joint letters to the House of Representatives and Senate applying Catholic moral principles to the budget debate and calling for priority attention to the needs of poor and vulnerable people.

They argued that these moral criteria should help guide difficult budgetary decisions:

- 1) Human Life and Dignity: Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity.
- 2) Priority for the Poor: A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects "the least of these." This is the truth of Matthew 25. The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty should come first.
- 3) Common Good: Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times.

These criteria led to a key overall judgment. A just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons. It requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.

These principles have led to some important themes for advocacy related to the budget:

- 1) Budget choices are economic, political, and moral.

- 2) Political leaders face difficult challenges as they seek to get our financial house in order: fulfilling the demands of justice and moral obligations to future generations; controlling future debt and deficits; and protecting the lives and dignity of those who are poor and vulnerable.
- 3) The Catholic bishops of the United States stand ready to work with leaders of both parties for a budget that reduces future deficits, protects poor and vulnerable people, advances the common good, and promotes human life and dignity.
- 4) The Conference of Bishops will continue to use this moral framework to evaluate budget plans and proposals as they emerge.

As members of the one human family, I invite you to do the same.

Let me give you an example of the disproportionate cuts facing the poor. If you ask the general American public what percentage of the national budget goes to international assistance for people in poor countries, the mean answer is 25%. If you ask them how much we ought to spend, the mean answer is 10%. They are shocked to learn that it is about 1%. But initial proposals for the FY 2011 budget proposed cutting poverty-focused international assistance by 38% while cutting the overall budget by less than 3%.

Please consider your opportunities to share the moral and human dimensions of disproportionate cuts to programs serving poor and vulnerable people at home and abroad.

- Visit the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development at uscgb.org to learn more about what the bishops have said about the budget.
- Send emails to friends and encourage them to become involved.
- Write letters to the editor.
- Contact your Members of Congress in the House and the Senate and stress the importance of protecting poor and vulnerable people as they work to reduce future budget deficits.
- Highlight specifics about how disproportionate cuts would hurt your local efforts to serve poor and vulnerable people.

Many dioceses, parishes, and the broader Catholic community are providers of Head Start, refugee resettlement, affordable housing, emergency food and shelter, homeless services, child care, and other programs. Many are twinned with the Church in poor developing countries and support the work of Catholic Relief Services in delivering humanitarian and development assistance, often in partnership with the U.S. Government. You have experience that can help give the issues in the budget a human face, the face of the members of the one human family, especially those members who are often not seen—the poor, the vulnerable, the forgotten.

Now for some concluding words of encouragement.

Let me start with a story. About five years ago, I accompanied Bishop William Murphy as we traveled overland from Rwanda to the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)—the Kivu region. We were going to visit then Bishop Maroy, now the Archbishop of Bukavu. We were running late. We thought we were just meeting with the bishop. When we got there we entered the meeting hall of the Cathedral and it was packed with men and women and there were children peering in the doors and windows. At Bishop Maroy's invitation, they had gathered to tell us their stories of violence and rape at the hands of militias who displaced people from their lands and illicitly extracted minerals to enrich themselves and buy weapons. For hours we listened to their heart wrenching stories. In the morning, we celebrated a joyous mass, complete with native dancing. Faith brought joy to their lives in the midst of the suffering.

After mass the whole congregation, processed outside to the grave of the slain Archbishop, a man of faith who had spoken courageously against the violent militias and was murdered for his defense of the people. At the conclusion of the prayers at the gravesite, Bishop Murphy removed his pectoral cross and placed it in the hands of Bishop Maroy, promising that we would take to heart what we had heard the previous night and that the U.S. Conference of Bishops would do what it could to help. You could hear a pin drop. The crowd was deeply moved.

Five years later, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops made good on Bishop Murphy's promise. At the urging of the Bishops' Conference of the Congo and with the support of Catholics throughout the country, Catholic Relief Services and other allies, we successfully urged Congress to adopt a law that required companies registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission to certify that the minerals that they use in their products, like our cell phones, did not come from conflict mines in the DRC. This law, when fully implemented, will mean that our purchases of cell phones and other electronic devices will not inadvertently subsidize violent militias in the DRC that are terrorizing the local people. We can indeed make a difference. We can protect the one human family.

The work of building one human family can seem overwhelming. If at times we feel discouraged, we need to remember that the Reign of God is the horizon of our work and our lives. God's reign of perfect peace, love, joy and justice is already in our midst, however imperfectly; and Jesus assures us that we will be drawn into the fullness of that reign in the ultimate future. In God's eyes we are already one human family, His family. God loves each of us. He loves you; He loves me; He loves the poor and the vulnerable with a special concern.

Faith in God gives us cause for hope in the face of discouragement and despair. Faith gives us hope when there is little cause for optimism. And faith gives us something else as well because faith is not only our belief in God, which it surely is; but faith is also God's belief in us.

God believes in us. Transformed by God's love for us, God's faith in us, we can work as brothers and sisters to build one human family.

To a world struggling with the global economic crisis, the global ecological crisis, and the scandal of global poverty, last year Pope Benedict XVI offered remarkable assurance born of faith in his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*:

“God's love calls us to move beyond the limited and the ephemeral, it gives us the courage to continue seeking and working for the benefit of all, even if this cannot be achieved immediately and if what we are able to achieve, alongside political authorities and those working in the field of economics, is always less than we might wish. God gives us the strength to fight and to suffer for love of the common good, because he is our All, our greatest hope.”

God “is our All, our greatest hope.” And to that all I can say is “amen.”