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Bishop Emeritus

Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Catholic Charities USA Convention

Opening Mass Homily

Saturday, September 30, 2000

Numbers 11:25 - 29

James 5:1-6

Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

We are still too close to the twentieth century to put it in a proper historical perspective. Future scholars, perhaps a generation from now, will inherit a rich and diverse archive for interpretation and analysis. From both a secular and a sacred viewpoint there are many questions which will be asked and debated. They will become the subject of countless seminars of dubious intellectual value.

Our task is much simpler. A saint of an earlier century once observed that a Christian is "one into whose care has been committed his fellow man." Our question is, "How are we doing?" On the assumption that we would all like to think of ourselves as Christians, that is, dedicated followers of the man from Nazareth, then perhaps it would be a fair answer to say that we may be doing better than we were, but we still have a long, long way to go. In other words, the journey has merely begun.

I would willingly forego giving this homily today if there were some way, perhaps by some magical osmosis, that you could absorb into your very being all that is said in *In All Things Charity*, the pastoral challenge which our bishops issued almost a year ago. It has many virtues. It is short. It is easy to read. It tells a wonderful story. It is a marvelous synthesis of God's word and papal insight. It chronicles our awakening to the reality of what we call the social gospel. It champions the dignity of every human person and, to our shame, it catalogues the multiple ways we have either callously violated or passively ignored that dignity. It challenges us to action. As individuals, as groups, as Church we are called to the housetops to proclaim justice, to espouse mercy and to practice charity. Aided by God's grace, fortified by the credibility of our own lives, we are called to arouse the populace, demand responsibility from our leaders, combat the deadly disease of apathy, make the selfish uncomfortable, create a culture with a conscience and, with a gentle but unrelenting zeal, become the voice for all those who are innocent, abandoned, powerless, brutalized or in any way dismissed by an insensitive society which seeks to solve its problems by eliminating them.

It is not easy to stand in the marketplace and be a modern prophet. It is not easy to ask for justice for the hungry and the homeless and the ill-clad when a smug society is sanctimoniously trying to convince itself that these people are the authors of their own misery. It is not easy, but it must be done. Giving our prophets great funerals does not absolve us from heeding and responding to their message. In short, we are called to be people who care.

Approved in the dying days of the last century, *In All Things Charity* is in many ways a popular

summary of 100 years of papal exposition of the social content of the gospel message. When the Church was forcefully deprived of the Papal States, its loss was more than adequately replaced by the freedom it received to speak out fearlessly on behalf of the oppressed without worrying about the obligations inherent in superfluous possessions. The institution began to imitate the wisdom of Francis and Camillus and Vincent de Paul. Beginning with the clarion call of Leo XIII, who put his name to *Rerum Novarum*, augmented by *Quadragesimo Anno* of Pius XI, enhanced by John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, Christ's call to have us identify him in the faces of the poor and the deprived came to a crescendo in the multiple and oft-repeated writings of our current Holy Father, John Paul II.

Christ, our Savior, ushered in a new age when he personalized the Isaian message in the synagogue of Nazareth. He forced us to look deep inside ourselves when he recounted the unexpected kindness of the Samaritan on the road to Jerico. He dumbfounded us when he conditioned our salvation on the way we respond to him when he presents himself to us disguised as one who is today hungry, tomorrow naked, next week in prison.

It is a glorious message. It is a compelling proclamation. It is a powerful agenda. It is articulate, to the point and inspiring. It is an epic achievement of the last century. Now, however, the time has come, the new millennium has dawned, and it falls to us to tackle two challenges. Initially, to convince more and more within our Church and, indeed, all people of goodwill, that the fulfillment of living like Christ is in caring for others. We must not allow the proclamation to dissolve into a fading echo. And, secondly, we must give reality to the dream. Like a John the Baptist we must attract, convince and produce results in the name of Christ. The spirit of our baptism must exorcize our complacency and enable us to march step by step in a vital life-giving partnership with the One who came among us "to serve and not to be served."

Love Swings to the Music of Justice is the theme for our Convention. Besides its obvious Kansas City connotations, we must admit that it has a somewhat utopian ring to it. We treasure our successes even though they are never enough. We relish our breakthroughs even though the smiles are dwarfed by an almost endless avalanche of pain and want and misery. Swimming against the tide seems to be a suitable metaphor. As professionals and volunteers you are most familiar with the Lord's declaration that the poor will be always with us. I will not bore you with an endless barrage of statistics giving graphic evidence of the ravages wrought by hunger, homelessness, drug addiction, child abuse, AIDS, abortion -- and now RU-486 -- divorce, suicide, sexual promiscuity and all the ills that destroy the dignity of the human person. You deal with them every day. You do not have to be converted.

You may have heard of the so-called "good" Poverty Report issued by the Census Bureau for 1999 just a few days ago. An editorial published on Thursday this week in *The Washington Post*, while admitting the improvement in a time of sustained national economic growth, dampened our elation with a dose of reality therapy. Reminding us that the test of a welfare system comes in a weak economy, not a strong one, the writer went on to say, "The poverty rate for children was down last year, but a sixth of the children in the country were still officially poor; the poverty was more acute than in prior years; the income inequality remained at record levels. The year-to-year news was good; the underlying figures are still not a pretty picture." (*The Washington Post*, editorial, September 28, 2000).

Back in 1848, three members of my ancestral family died of starvation in rural Ireland during the Great Famine. The real agony is not that there was no food when the potatoes failed. In their cases there was more than adequate food, but it was forcefully seized and shipped over-

seas to pay the rent. Sad as this may be, it pales in comparison to the fact that every year in this country 100 billion pounds of food go to waste, and yet, 31 million people are hungry or at risk of hunger.

Clearly, "love does not always swing to the music of justice." The contrasts between rich and poor are too great. We are out of sync. The music, if there is any, is discordant. But because we are a people of hope we must believe that the orchestra is just warming up, getting in tune, waiting for a whole host of Christ-imbued conductors to tap the podium and call for silence -- that sacred hush when grace takes over and everybody plays and prays and works together to produce music sustained by a mysterious power not of this world.

It was this purpose that 90 years ago the forerunner of Catholic Charities USA came into being. 1910 was a year noted for the number of world-wide celebrities who died, ranging from religious leaders to royalty. There was Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science; King Edward VII of an empire which would not survive the century. Add to these Leo Tolstoy, Florence Nightingale, Winslow Homer, O. Henry and Mark Twain -- the latter for real this time, as he had previously wryly observed that reports of his death some years earlier were somewhat exaggerated!

That same year, a rather somber 22-member executive committee gathered on the steps of Catholic University to launch the National Conference of Catholic Charities. Ringing in their ears was the rather enigmatic endorsement of Cardinal Gibbons who expressed his desire that the new Conference would "realize more than the earnest hopes of its friends." It has. The good Cardinal need not have been so cautious. You are aware of many of those early pioneers whose mantle you have now inherited. May I mention but three -- Rashey Moten, whose gentle spirit must surely be present among us and, in the light of recent announcements, Bishop Joseph Sullivan and Father Fred Kammer, whose long service and whole-hearted dedication to Catholic Charities will enter the annals as nothing less than heroic. They walked in the shoes of giants, and they filled them well.

We are the ones who give the cup of water in Christ's name, and Mark reminds us to that to ensure that it is for Christ that we do so, it may be necessary to use radical measures to rid ourselves of all that hinders our intimacy with the Lord. James, who never minced words, does not spare the rich who have gouged the poor, the haves who have crushed the have-nots. Injustice cries aloud to the heavens and the Lord of hosts is a good listener. There must be no room for jealousy in the apostolate. Eldad and Medad may be latecomers, but there is room for all. There is no chaining the Spirit of God. We can make our own the cry of Moses, "Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!"

We all need role models, and our Holy Father has provided us with a new one this weekend. Within hours Pope John Paul II will canonize Katherine Drexel, our second American-born saint. She should become the special patron for all those engaged in the ministry of charity, just as St. Elizabeth Ann Seton has inspired Catholic educators. This wealthy Philadelphia heiress spent her life and her fortune in bettering the lives of the very poor of the African-American and Native American communities. She championed their God-given dignity as human beings at a time in this land when all they look forward to was more poverty, more prejudice and constant victimization. She founded Xavier University and Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to perpetuate her work against racism.

Unlike the young man in the Scriptures who sadly rejected Christ's call to follow him because

he was more preoccupied with his many possessions, Katherine Drexel saw in her great fortune the obligation and the opportunity to share it with others and to do something positive for God. We can pray and hope that on this weekend, when here sanctity is confirmed, she may be instrumental in opening our hearts to the graces which enabled her to see Christ in all whom she served. We need that affirmation every hour of every day.

AMEN