

Keynote Address by Archbishop Harry Flynn  
Bishop Joseph Abel Francis S.V.D. Scholarship Fund Dinner  
December 2, 2000

I want to thank you for the invitation to offer a few reflections at this distinguished event. I am especially grateful because this event honors the memory of Bishop Joseph Francis and because it supports the scholarship fund that bears his name. This scholarship fund keeps alive the memory of Bishop Francis and the values and vision that he stood for. And for that, we are all very grateful.

In the brief remarks that follow, I'd like to reflect with you on three elements from the coat of arms that was chosen by Bishop Joseph Francis. If you have ever seen this coat of arms, you know that it incorporates a fascinating and inspiring combination of symbols. I will focus on just three.

First is the symbol of the cross that is in the center of the coat of arms. It is a simple cross, but it appears in the middle of a broken set of chains. This symbol of liberation and freedom is one that inspired Bishop Francis and should inspire us today as well. For he had a profound love of Christ and his Church. He had a deep sense of the cross as a sign of the ultimate liberation that comes through Christ's death and resurrection.

Bishop Francis was not a stranger to the cross. His ancestors were slaves in the American south, and he never lost touch with the suffering and oppression that were part of his roots. He not only cared **about** the poor and the weak, he identified with them. He saw reality through their eyes. So too is the calling that Jesus Christ places before all of us — to see and know the suffering of the poor, to identify the very presence of God in the weak and the lowly, the lost and the left out. In our culture of unprecedented prosperity and a growing sense of materialism, this appreciation for the cross, this sense of authentic compassion is more necessary than ever.

The cross is not only about suffering and oppression, however. It is also about liberation and resurrection. It is about hope. On the Bishop's coat of arms, the cross appears in the middle of a broken set of chains — emphasizing that Christ's cross leads to resurrection, to liberation. In a very personal way Bishop Francis symbolized this sense of hope and resurrection. He was, as one friend described him, a "happy warrior." He wore a disarmingly warm smile and he always had a twinkle in his eye. When you were in his presence, you sensed the full attention and deep respect that he had for you. He was quick to laugh, quick to tell a story, quick to offer a word of encouragement.

Might I suggest that our Church and our world needs more "happy warriors" like Bishop Francis. We need priests and lay leaders who are deeply sensitive to the suffering and oppression of the poor, but who also are guided by the hope of the resurrection, a hope that believes in the possibility of liberation, a hope that works actively to bring about that liberation in the name of Christ Jesus.

If the scholarship fund that you are supporting helps in some small way to bring forth more "happy warriors" like this, then surely it will make the smile on Bishop Francis' face even wider.

A second feature of the coat of arms that I would like to address is a set of symbols that reflect Bishop Francis' passionate commitment to overcoming racism. On the coat of arms we see an image of the Watts Towers in Los Angeles, rising to the sky as a sign of hope. One tower is black; one is white. We also see an image of sugar cane stalks, the symbol of the oppression and survival of his ancestors who worked the cane fields of Louisiana.

Fighting racism was an ever present passion for Bishop Francis. For him it was both a personal and a public matter. At the personal level, Bishop Francis showed us the importance of respect for the dignity of others. He went out of his way to treat others with caring and attentiveness, and he taught others to do the same.

As you know, Bishop Francis was instrumental in the drafting of the U.S. bishops pastoral letter on racism entitled *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. Early in that document we find the following important passage:

Racism is a sin; a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father. It mocks the words of Jesus: "Treat others the way you have them treat you." Indeed, racism is more than a disregard for the words of Jesus; it is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.

These words remind us of the terrible evil that is racism. They call us to a renewed personal commitment to treat others with respect, and to denounce and resist all forms of individual racism. This must be the message that each of us proclaims and that we proclaim as the Church — that all men and women are brothers and sisters, that all are one in Christ, that all bear the image of the Eternal God. For ours is a Church that is truly universal, embracing all races. It is the visible sacrament of the saving unity of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Francis firmly believed that racism was not only a personal matter, but also a social and institutional matter. He never tired of speaking out against the anonymous racism that is embodied in the structures and institutions of society, the invisible racism that is woven into the cultural and economic fabric of our nation.

What the pastoral letter proclaimed more than twenty years ago is, regrettably, still true:

Crude and blatant expression of racist sentiment, though they occasionally exist, are today considered bad form. Yet racism itself persists in covert ways. Under the guise of other motives, it is manifest in the tendency to stereotype and marginalize whole segments of the population. It is manifest also in the indifference that replaces open hatred.

The minority poor are seen as the dross of a post-industrial society-without skills, without motivation, without incentive. They are expendable. Many times the new face of racism is the computer statistic. Today's racism flourishes in the triumph of private concern over public responsibility, individual success over social commitment, and personal fulfillment over authentic compassion.

It saddens me to acknowledge that racism remains one of America's most serious unresolved evils. It divides our nation in fundamental ways, and it threatens the lives and dignity of millions of human beings. Just consider, for example, the state of America's black children. As you may well know, roughly one half of all black children below the age of six live in families that are poor. By definition, these millions of black children are living in families that lack sufficient economic resources to meet their basic needs. These children have less chance of getting a decent education, less chance of staying healthy, less chance of avoiding drug and alcohol abuse. In short, they have less chance of having their sacred dignity respected. They have less chance of becoming fully human.

This is nothing less than a social and moral scandal. It cries out today for justice in the same way that Bishop Francis cried out for justice. And we honor his memory every time we take one small step to undo the racism and injustice that so stubbornly persist in our midst.

As Bishop Francis would have been quick to point out, this challenge faces us in terms of the Church's own structures and policies as well. What we proclaim for the wider society, we must also practice ourselves. Indeed, we should be exemplary. Here again, I would ask you to listen to the message of the pastoral letter that Bishop Francis helped draft:

The prophetic voice of the Church, which is to be heard in every generation and even to the ends of the earth, must not be muted — especially not by the counter witness of some of its own people. Let the Church speak out, not only in the assemblies of the bishops, but in every diocese and parish in the land, in every chapel and religious house, in every school, in every social service agency, and in every institution that bears the name Catholic. As Pope John Paul II has proclaimed, the Church must be

aware of the threats to humanity and of all that opposes the endeavor to make life itself more human. The Church must strive to make every element of human life correspond to the true dignity of the human person.

This brings me to the third part of the coat of arms that I would like to reflect on. Across the bottom of the coat of arms are the words “justice, peace, liberty.” This motto sums up the goal to which Bishop Francis dedicated his life. While he had a special passion for fighting the evils of racism, this was not an isolated concern. Bishop Francis had an enduring hunger for justice in all areas of life. For him, the call to overcome racism was part of the wider call to achieve justice, peace and liberty for all.

Bishop Francis understood the social justice message of the Gospel as an integral part of his own personal faith. He viewed it as a central part of his priesthood and his role as a bishop. And he understood it’s key role in the life of the Church itself. It is this integral role of the Church’s social mission that I would ask you to reflect on briefly.

Bishop Francis understood that to be Catholic is to be concerned about human dignity. It is to be concerned about the way the world works, about how we structure our society. This concern is not new, it’s not optional, it’s not extracurricular. It is essential; it’s a necessary element of being fully Catholic. It is what all of us must be about if we are to be mature Christians.

One of the most important resources we have in carrying out the Church’s social mission is our rich tradition of Catholic social teaching. This teaching is a valuable tool to help us reflect on what it means to be a Christian in the contemporary world. At the core of this teaching is a set of moral principles that can help us evaluate our actions at both the individual and societal levels. These principles — such as the dignity of the human person, the common good, basic human rights and responsibilities, the option for the poor — these are both substantive and deeply challenging.

I say deeply challenging because our Catholic social vision represents, in many ways, a counter-cultural force in America.

- In the face of declining respect for human life and powerful pressures to solve our social problems with violence, we in the Church oppose the legal destruction of our unborn children. We oppose the return to the death penalty.
- In the midst of diminished action to fight poverty, we insist that the test of our national policies is how they affect the poor and the vulnerable among us. At a time when much of the nation is focused on economic prosperity, we continue to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and empower victims of injustice.
- In a society frequently overwhelmed by materialism, the Church says material things are not all-important. What is important is how we treat one another, whether we love one another, whether we reach out to the least among us.

In this context, let me give special emphasis to Catholic teaching on the notion of the common good. I believe that restoring a healthy commitment to the common good is one of the most significant social tasks of our time. Contemporary society is characterized by a radical separation of private life and social life. Far too often our culture promotes an ethic of private interest and private struggle to the near exclusion of social virtues and social commitments. I fear that we are witnessing a loss of commitment to the social order, a declining willingness to sacrifice one’s immediate selfish interests for the good of the wider society.

The Catholic vision of community and commitment to the common good was a mark of Bishop Francis’ life. I believe that we must all work to make this same vision become a mark of our nation’s social ethic. We need to help fashion an ethic that reflects the words which the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

The body is one and has many members, but all the members, many though they are, are one body; and so it is with Christ... .If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members share its joy.(I Cor 12:12-27)

In closing, I would like to return to something I said earlier. Our Church and our nation need more “happy warriors” in the image of Bishop Francis. We need more priests and lay leaders with a deep commitment to Christ, with a close familiarity with His cross and an unfailing hope in His resurrection. We need more Christians with an unwillingness to tolerate racism in any form or any place. We need more Catholics with an understanding of Catholic social teaching and a deep and unwavering commitment to social justice.

I pray that these needs will be met. I am confident that they will be. With the continued good work of the Society of the Divine Word, with the commitment that Xavier University has shown in bringing forth strong leaders, and with the support of people like you, who make possible such wonderful programs as the Bishop Joseph Abel Francis Scholarship Fund — with all of these good people and these good works, I am confident that we can succeed. In doing so, we will be honoring the memory of our beloved Bishop Francis, our “happy warrior.”