

47th World Day of Prayer for Peace

As we continue our celebration of Christmas and begin a new year, today the Church focuses on Mary, under the title of "Holy Mother of God." For the last 47 years, Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and now, Pope Francis have asked that the Church community celebrate New Years as a special day of prayer for peace in the world.

In our Parish, during our Advent and Christmas days, we've been reflecting on the call to journey to our hearts, our spiritual centers, to our true soul, authentic selves where the Spark of God is present. Traditionally the church has focused on Mary as a model for us in that journey to the heart. In today's Gospel, when the shepherds make known the message that had been revealed to them about Jesus, Luke tells us:

"Mary kept all of these things, reflecting on them in her heart."

Mary opened her entire being to God, contemplating the *Word* in her heart, while bearing the *Word* in her body. Sisters and brothers, we imitate Mother Mary when we contemplate God's Word in our hearts and embody that Word in our daily living.

+++++

As we look at a world, bleeding from violence and war – South Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan are just a few examples of current 'hotspots' in today's headlines – we know that we live in a world, a nation, a city, neighborhoods, families and hearts that in many ways are permeated with violence. On this 47th World Day of Prayer for Peace, the truth is that *the teachings of Jesus on nonviolence have, by-and-large, been ignored or rejected by Christians for the last 1700 years*. As I often mention: Christians have killed more Christians and other human beings, than any other religion in the history of the world!

Yet, my sisters and brothers, there are growing signs of hope that in our Catholic Church, as well as in other Christian Communities, there is a growing awareness that it's time that we ponder – deep in our hearts – the primary Gospel teaching of Jesus that clearly prohibits violence as a means to solve conflict, whether it is on the battlefield or in our living-rooms. Beginning with Pope John XXIII, every contemporary Pope has called every war – beginning with Vietnam to the present day – immoral. In today's New Year's Day message Francis states:

I appeal forcefully to all those who sow violence and death by force of arms: in the person you today see simply as an enemy to be beaten, discover rather your brother or sister, and hold back your hand! Give up the way of arms and go out to meet the other in dialogue, pardon and reconciliation, in order to rebuild justice, trust and hope around you! From this standpoint, it is clear, that for all the world's peoples, armed conflicts are always a deliberate negation of

international harmony, and create profound divisions and deep wounds which require many years to heal. Wars are a concrete refusal to pursue the great economic and social goals that the international community has set for itself."

Another hopeful sign is our Catholic social teaching, developing over the last 100 years, with support from a growing number of scholars from all fields, that holds, as Pope Paul IV summarized so profoundly in addressing the United Nations 1968: "If you want peace, work for justice!" Peace in our world will blossom to the extent that social justice blossoms in our Global Village. Pope Francis raised the eyebrows of many when, in his Apostolic Exhortation: "The Joy of the Gospel" published Nov. 25, 2013, in ¶25, he states:

Peace in society cannot be understood as pacification or mere absence of violence resulting from the domination one part of society over others. Nor does true peace act as a pretext for justifying a social structure that silences or appeases the poor, so that the more affluent can placidly support their lifestyle while others have to make due as they can. Demands involving the distribution of wealth, concern for the poor and human rights cannot be suppressed under the guise of creating a consensus on paper or a transient peace for a contented minority.

The dignity of the human person and the common good ranks higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges. When these values are threatened, a prophetic voice must be raised.

In the end, a peace which is not the result of integral development will be doomed; it will always spawn new conflicts and various forms of violence."

(A little personal note: For these words, Rush Limbaugh called Pope Francis "a Marxist." I'd suggest that if you're publically criticized by Rush Limbaugh.... you must be doing something right! ... just my opinion!)

+++++

My sisters and brothers, on this New Year's Day – World Day of Prayer for Peace, I invite us to do a couple of things:

- 1) reflect on the Gospel teachings of Jesus concerning violence, look deep into our hearts, struggle with them if necessary, *ponder* this teaching in our hearts...;
- 2) The Spiritual Giants tell us that we are capable of being at peace with others, only to the extent that we are at peace with self. True peace is waiting for us in our hearts, our spiritual centers where the Spark of God is present. Let us *ponder* in our hearts what this might mean for us in our personal lives, relationships and our greater

community. Do I need to be healed of violence within...? Hatred, jealousy, envy, un-forgiveness are all things that block the 'arteries' to our spiritual centers.

- 3) Catholic social teaching, developed over the last 100 years, is often called 'the best kept secret in the Church'! Next Thursday evening, January 9, at Lemoyne College; and Friday, January 10, at Christ the King Retreat House, Jack Jezreel, the Founder and Director of Just Faith, will be addressing the issue of 'Catholic Social Action and the Gospel of Jesus.' A flyer and sign-up for the events will be available this coming weekend. The Parish will cover registration costs. This would be a great way to start the New Year!

I would like to conclude with the prayer to Mary that Pope Francis used in concluding his Apostolic Exhortation in November:

"Virgin of Listening and Contemplation, Mother of Love, Star of the New Evangelization: help us to bear radiant witness to communion, service, ardent and generous faith, justice and love of the poor, that the joy of the Gospel may reach to the ends of the earth, illuminating even the fringes of our world.

Mother of the living Gospel, Well-spring of Happiness for God's little ones, pray for us. Amen. Alleluia!"