

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception Burlington

Address by Bishop Christopher J Coyne

January 29, 2015



Ecumenical Prayer Service address

My friends,

I cannot begin to tell you how pleased I am to be here this evening with you as I take possession of this cathedral. I welcome the governmental and civic leaders who are here and thank them for their gracious presence. Please know of my continuing prayers for you and all our civic leaders as you seek to govern in the state of Vermont. I've been told that Vermonters can be somewhat free-spirited and free-thinking. I'm not sure if that's true ... oh it is? Well good luck then.

I am especially glad to have joined in prayer with my brothers and sisters within the ecumenical and interfaith community. I am aware that this cathedral is only one of many places of worship within this city, places where prayer and worship are lifted up to God, places where charity is encouraged and enacted, places where the human person reaches for an encounter with the Divine. With the representatives of the Christian churches and communities I join this week in a time of prayer for unity among Christians, praying in the words of Jesus Himself "that all may be one." While there are things that divide us, there are also many things that unite us, most especially our love for the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior. To my colleagues in the interfaith community, the shared belief we have in the Divine One and the common mission of care for the poor, sick, and needy in our midst unites us in charity and honors the One that we serve. I pledge myself to work with you on those things about which we agree and speak the Catholic Church's faith to those matters about which we disagree.

I am not a politician. I am a pastor. I am not a policy-maker. I am a preacher and teacher of the Catholic Faith. My desire is to teach what the Church teaches, to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ, and inform the consciences of my fellow Catholics about what we believe and why we believe. While I always seek to foster the common good of all, I recognize that I do so as one within a diverse and multi-faceted culture of which the Catholic Church is only one faith among many.

It seems to me that the reading that we just heard from the Letter of James is quite appropriate for this task. It was not a reading I chose but one that is prescribed for the Feast of Saint Thomas Aquinas, which we Catholics and a number of other Christian communities celebrate today. My hope is to be “wise” in the manner of which James writes: peaceable, rich in sympathy and the kindly deeds that are the fruits of wisdom. I can’t make any guarantee about being docile though. It is just not in my nature.

I’m a student of history, having received my doctorate in Sacred Liturgy from the Pontifical Liturgical Institute in Rome. The P.I.L, as it is called, is famous for its use of the historical-critical method for the study of liturgy. One necessarily had to become versed in Church history in order to understand the development and meaning of the Church’s liturgical practices. One thing I’ve learned is that in the encounter between human beings there is often not that much new under the sun. What I mean is when looking for wisdom on how to work together or get along or live in community or any number of interpersonal endeavors, the best place to look is often to the wisdom of the past. So in considering what I might offer for our consideration tonight, my thoughts turned to a writing that is close to our New England heritage. It is the sermon preached by the lay leader John Winthrop in 1630 as the Puritans were preparing to land in what is now Massachusetts. It is entitled “A Model of Christian Unity.” I know, I know. This text has often been used, on the one hand, by politicians to support the idea of “American exceptionalism” – that we are a “city on a hill” for all to follow in the great experiment that is America – and on the other hand that Winthrop’s intention in the new world was to establish a Puritan theocracy, but I think we can set those concerns aside and consider Winthrop’s preaching on unity in love or fraternal charity as a binding force for the establishment of mutual cooperation.

Winthrop preached that the bond of charity among Christians was a necessary part of their community, “as the sinews and other ligaments of a natural body are to the being of that body” and that it was “a divine, spiritual nature” - free, active, strong, courageous and permanent. Winthrop believed that having this "bond of love" for one and other would unite a group of people that would be blessed by God and impact the world (as they knew it) in a positive manner. “Despite the diversity of people, living in mutual charity could unite people of completely different socioeconomic backgrounds to work together and better the world” ([citation: wikipedia](#)).

I would offer that we can move beyond Winthrop's particularly Christian leitmotif into the broader context of interfaith, even non-religious relationships. It begins, I believe with the golden rule - to do unto others as I would have them do unto me - but then moves beyond a kind of mutual exchange of personal value - "you do for me, I do for you" - to one of charity, meaning seeking the "good" for the other person, and seeking nothing in return. The hope is that the "other" will respond in kind, that my neighbor will seek what is good for me as I seek what is good for him or her.

Today's gospel text from the Common Lectionary gives us the parable of the sower:

A sower went out to sow.

And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path,
and the birds came and ate it up.

Other seed fell on rocky ground where it had little soil.

It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep.

And when the sun rose, it was scorched and it withered for lack of roots.

Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it
and it produced no grain.

And some seed fell on rich soil and produced fruit.

It came up and grew and yielded thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold."

I have always considered one interpretation of this text to be an allegory for the works of charity and service. Each of us is the sower who sows good deeds. Some of our deeds are appreciated. Some are simply received by some as their "due." Some don't want or welcome our help at all. But then there are those persons who accept our good act as it is and then become people who also become sowers. But the point is that the sower does not seek anything in return. He or she just sows because it is the right thing to do, because it brings light instead of darkness, because it serves the common good.

All of this engages us in the broader question of what is best for the common good. The golden rule urges me to feed the hungry person because that is what I would want if I were hungry. An act rooted in communal charity and aimed at the common good urges me to look even further, to the roots of and possible solutions to poverty. It is best summed up in the familiar adage, "Give someone a fish and you feed them for a day. Teach them to fish

and you feed them for a lifetime.” My hope and prayer is that we can all work within a unity of charity that probes the deeper questions of how to further both the individual and the common good while seeking only that that good be returned in kind.

Finally, allow me to end my reflections this evening by referring to the last line of the reading from James: “The harvest of justice is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace.” It is often difficult for us to agree about how we are to pray together. Different canons, creeds, and confessions can complicate things very quickly. When we try and worship as one, we most often end up with a compromise that leaves no one happy. Yet, I think there is one thing about which we can agree, not so much as to how we are to pray but for what we are to pray: peace - for an end to violence, hatred, and war. If we do nothing else in our common gathering than to pray for peace and pray that we may each be peacemakers in our own way within our own faiths and our own beliefs, then we are doing something of the good, of the divine, of God. I commit myself, once again, to strive to be a “peacemaker,” someone who prays for peace, advocates for peace, and seeks to live in peace with his brothers and sisters and I pray that my actions may bring forth a harvest of justice for all God’s creatures. May God bless us all in that endeavor.