

Presentation to the Social Action Summer Institute, 7-18-18

Bishop Jaime Soto

The common pastoral approach is to begin with looking at the reality around us. Many of us in this room are familiar with the pastoral discernment method, “See, judge, act”. When “seeing” we take up the call of the Church to look at the “signs of the times.” In doing so we may look at the world through economic, political, social lens or listen to anecdotal accounts from the people involved. These are all sound and prudent approaches. Admittedly, doing so today can be a rather dismal enterprise.

This morning, I want to invite you to look more deeply, to push beyond the pressing and urgent matters of the day, to see and visualize our hopes and aspirations, to look more closely at what we believe about ourselves and the world. In proposing this course, I caution you against falling into a false optimism. Optimism can be a good thing but it usually roots itself in some evidence or supposition that things will go a certain way. Both Democrats and Republicans offer dueling optimisms about the coming months. When I talk about hope, I am thinking about “religious hope” even daring to propose a “prophetic hope.” I am considering hope in the manner St. Paul spoke about it in

his letter to the Romans, “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance. (Rom. 8.24-25)

This hope is hard to hold. It has a prophetic quality that sent Abraham away from his own land. It is the hope that brought Moses before Pharaoh. Hope animated the Isaiah’s vision of the suffering servant. We should all reach for this hope now, because hope is what can help us see through the prevailing bleakness and daunting polarization to what St. Peter urged us to see: “According to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth.” Savoring this prophetic gaze may be the needed antidote to a form of seeing that may trap us or entangle us in the short-sighted vision of contemporary political discourse.

I propose that religious hope is where we will also find our freedom to act upon our deepest convictions. The well-known observer of American life, Alexis De Tocqueville, admired the religious character of the then nascent America because of the freedom it gave its people. A person’s liberty was ensured and supported by the belief in a transcendent God. One did not have to conform to the whims of political trends or the disposition of those in power. Religious hope gave a creative freedom to the citizen of a society. I am not asking us

to abandon the wise dictum of “see-judge-act”. I pray that we can begin to see with the prophetic eyes of Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Mary of Nazareth, Peter, and Paul. May the Lord Jesus turn our eyes both to the Father as well as into the world to see with fiery clarity the kingdom to come.

Pope Francis has been a good model for us in bringing new eyes and new hope to the work of the disciples of Jesus in the world today. The theme for this year’s gathering is taken from his own words, “Love requires a concrete, creative response.” Among the many beautiful and thoughtful metaphors the Holy Father has offered to us, I would like to consider his vision for a new “Integral Human Ecology.” By the very terminology he proposes, we are called to re-examine our own humanity in a new counter-cultural way. The human person does not exist independent of creation. We are not our own self-creation as is proposed by many naïve ideological fads. We are created by God as part of the natural world. He has created us to share in creative cultivation of a common home where we can all thrive in praising his divine mercy. This new vision compels us to see ourselves body and soul as part of rich fabric of life that weaves us together in family, community, and worship. Each of these is an essential dimension to the dignity of the human person and can only be realized in a healthy integral ecology. We are created by these dimensions. They are part of

our nature and should be part of our culture. We cannot truly understand ourselves outside of these dimensions. We deceive or even distort ourselves when we do. The contemporary mood questions and challenges these very human and natural dimensions. They have become replaceable components, quaint, downloadable accessories. Pope Francis rejects the throw-away and disposable mentality. Family, community, and worship are the frame and fabric of authentic integral human ecology.

Our own Catholic tradition offers the human person an environment where one can flourish in family, community and worship. The central mystery of the incarnation when the word became flesh and dwelt among us is only fully appreciated in an ecology of family, community, and worship. How could we have come to know Jesus except as the son of Mary, a devout Jewish itinerant preacher, who gathered around him the poor and the sinner for the glory of His heavenly Father?

The sacramental and ritual life of the Church brings this same Jesus through each generation to our own time so that we continue to walk in the environment of family, community and worship charged by his divine mercy. The life of the Church is not some ethereal spiritual reality. God's grace is experienced in an ecology of body and soul

sharing with others a physical place savoring the fruits of creation: water, oil, bread and wine.

All of this is the crucible for an evangelical creativity. The word “creativity” in modern parlance is often understood as opposed to nature, ritual, and communal custom. The “creative person” is presumed to be unbound by these unnecessary limitations. Returning to the wise vision of *Laudato Sí*, Pope Francis cautions us against treating the world as neutral, meaningless matter, upon which we impress our own personal creativity. The world and recent history is filled with enough of fabricated “Frankensteins” made from our own presumed mastery over the creation.

An evangelical creativity flows from a reverence for the creator of the created world given to us, a particular reverence for our own created body and souls. So, when we speak of creativity, we must take up our task mindful that we are co-creators, co-artisans of the common home built with a human ecology where women and men may flourish in family, community, and worship.

An evangelical creativity is filled with tension, a creative tension. This tension is found in the two-fold mandate of fidelity. As the disciples of Jesus, dedicated to the incarnational work of incarnating our hopes in the world, we will always struggle to be faithful to Jesus

and faithful to a weary world waiting to be saved. Understand that we cannot be faithful to one without the other. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” (Jn. 3.16) Those who love the Lord Jesus must love the world so loved by His heavenly Father. That is a tough job.

The Dominican, Fr. Ives Congar, one of the great minds of the Second Vatican Council, wrote a book, first published in 1950, entitled *True and False Reform in the Church*. Reading the book today, it still speaks with a freshness, reminding us all that the Church is always in the process of reform and renewal. He talks about the tension of fidelity I have proposed here. He suggested that creativity must always be balanced by continuity and unity. The Church is her most creative self when she also maintains a spirit of continuity and unity. The Church betrays her apostolic continuity and unity when she ceases to be creative. This is not an easy tension to resolve, nor should it be resolved. That is why St. Paul, when speaking about the diversity of the Body of Christ, concluded with the mandate to love. “Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (I Cor. 13.4-7)

In this work, Fr. Congar spoke extensively about the peripheries. Pope Francis may have borrowed his own reflections from this earlier Dominican work. Fr. Congar noted that new initiatives for the Church have historically come from the peripheries. Those initiatives that were most successful and more fruitful were those that maintained a continuity and communion with the heart of the Church.

The list demonstrated is as extensive and diverse as the history of Christianity.

- Jesus lived in Nazareth. He was a Galilean.
- He went to the home of Zacchaeus.
- Jesus died outside the City of Jerusalem.
- “Go to Galilee there you will find him,” the angel told Mary Magdalene.
- Paul preached to the Gentiles.
- Monks fled the world.
- The Mendicants left the monasteries and preached on the street.
- Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits left Europe for the new world.

- Religious women left the cloister to build hospitals, schools, and social services.

- Fulton Sheen went on television.

- Dorothy Day created hospitality houses.

All of these creative initiatives, done in unity and continuity, helped the Church fulfill the two-fold mandate of fidelity.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis presented four pastoral principles which can help us find the balance reflected in our own Catholic history. (EG, 217-237)

- Time is greater than space.

- Unity prevails over conflict.

- Realities are more important than ideas.

- The whole is greater than the part.

Time is greater than space. The Holy Father expressed a concern that all too often there is a priority of space over time, a desire to control the exercise of power for intended outcomes, refusing to let processes of dialogue and participation produce a more authentic human development. The inclination is to believe time is running out or to fear what time could harbor. So, using the Holy Father's language,

there is the temptation to take possession of the “spaces of power” in order to hold back any process. Time has to do with hope, living with the expectation of a brighter horizon. Hope is more than an expectant feeling. Christian hope incarnates itself in time, using time to bring about the kingdom, carefully, deliberately.

Unity prevails over conflict. We should not be afraid of conflict but we should also hold firmly to the hope of unity. Managing conflict and resolving conflict requires skill but, more importantly, it requires a commitment to respectful dialogue and a desire for communion.

Realities are more important than ideas. This is a counter-cultural proposal. The default presumption is that reality is not readily available or that we create our own realities. A primary disposition for engaging this principle is the practiced virtue of humility.

The whole is greater than the part. This makes common sense until you watch the news. This is a challenge for the Church, for parishes, for neighborhoods as well as nations. The wisdom of St. Paul’s vision of the Body of Christ will always challenge us to create a truly integral human ecology.

Let me propose some of the peripheries where we should be engaging in evangelical creativity. This is not a comprehensive list, simply suggestions of new opportunities in the present moment.

Policing and Law Enforcement is fundamental part of healthy, flourishing neighborhoods. The relationship between police and many of our communities is tense if not precariously frayed. The encounters between police and young people have become confrontational and adversarial. Both sides want the Church to hear them and help them.

The “me, too” movement offers an opportunity to engage women on the issues of family, work, and leadership.

There are new opportunities to work with organized labor. Many of faithful are a part of unions. Many are without the labor protections that unions could provide. The Church and Unions had a historically long and fruitful relationship. That has been much diminished in recent decades. This is one of the areas where the work at the peripheries could be more beneficial and break new ground than discussions at national or regional levels.

Marriage has become the prerogative of the rich and educated. There is a staggering marriage equality for social and economic reasons that desperately need the attention that only the Church can give.

Working with Veterans. There are many who have returned from recent conflicts, wounded in both body and soul. The Church’s ministry to them offers an opportunity to engage anew the themes of war and peace.

Taking on the issue of sex education. This issue is usually relegated to catechesis or pre-marriage programs if at all. Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia*, speaks of the opportunities and the obligation to engage this issue as an important social issue. The future of young people will depend on helping them understand their God-given sexuality as a grace and not as a toy.

Popular Religiosity. Immigrant communities have reminded us of the rich treasure of popular piety that enlighten and enriches daily life. There are wonderful opportunities to engage the social issues with the power of popular Religiosity. This is also an area where clergy, often reluctant to engage social issues, may feel more confident under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

The national issues command our attention and drain our resources. For example, the separation of children and parents is hard to ignore. We cannot morally do so. Recognize, though, how the issue has been seized and controlled by personalities. This is only the most recent example. Understand how many of these issues have been consumed by larger market or governmental forces on one side and an expanding sense of the human person as self-expressive and autonomous on the other side. As a consequence of these powerful cultural centrifuges we see the diminishment of more intermediate and

proximate institutions, leaving the individual unencumbered but also unsupported against larger market or government forces. Neither one party nor the other is responsible for having brought us here. We have bumbled into this together.

This is not just a question of the religious liberty of our Catholic institutions. While there are significant differences, one could argue that in the recent Supreme Court Decision, *Janus vs AFSCME*, the Courts have ruled in favor of the individual with a detriment to the association. This is similar to arguments undermining the corporate integrity of religious institution. I only wish to raise the issue that we have a lot at stake in tending to the nature, structure, and mission of these more communal, intermediate associations that are vital to the thriving of individuals.

Let me close with a brief reflection on a necessary, prudent Christian virtue for the effective exercise of evangelical creativity, Patience.

Patience is not a weakness. It is a strength. It draws its inspiration from Christian hope, a confident hope in the Lord Jesus, a sure hope in his coming. Patience as a virtue is hope put into practice.

Patience does not let discouragement, difficulties, or obstacles become a distraction from the only valid destiny of the human heart.

Speaking about patience in *Amoris Laetitia*, the Holy Father said, “Unless we cultivate patience, we will always find excuses for responding angrily.” (AL, n. 92)

Patience in this way, is what keeps our hope from becoming the cause of anger or resentment. Patience helps hope endure so that hope encourages others rather than discourage. Hope without patience can betray its own aspirations by making us and others bitter.

Pope Francis, talked about time being more important than space. This can seem to be an odd pastoral principle unless we consider the role of patience. Patience gives hope time to grow. Fear or despair causes people to close any space for dialogue or control any room for change. Patience trusts in the power of truth to persuade and prevail. By giving time, patience creates the space for comprehension and conversion.

Patience is not resignation. It is not abdication. Patience believes in that well known prayer from the Alcoholics Anonymous movement, “Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, to change those things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Patience as a virtue is also an ascetic practice. It is focused on what we can do, not on what we cannot do.

Patience also helps us to cultivate a purity of heart. With patience we keep the heart and the mind focused on the hope for a culture of life, an integral human ecology. Without patience we can easily be distracted by the obstacles. Our message becomes poisoned by adversarial polemics, demeaning those who demean us. The evil of the throw-away culture threatens our hopes and temps us to an angry impatience or even to abandon hope. With patient perseverance we not only resist the evil. We become a reflection, an image, of the gospel of joy. We will give life to the hopes of others.

Another pastoral principle proposed by the Holy Father that encourages Christian patience is: “Reality is more important than ideas.” (EG, n. 231-233) Our convictions about the gospel of life, the rights of workers, solidarity with the immigrants, and the dignity of marriage are not just preferential religious tenets or contrived moral teachings. We hold to these convictions because they are firmly rooted in reality. We can be patient because “reality is greater than ideas.” Patience places our feet firmly on the ground of the real world created by God.

A good metaphor for patience is the prayer vigil. You patiently pray at the places where the culture of death is practiced: abortion centers, death row prisons, detention centers. You pray for those who

are involved in the obscure web of lives extinguished, lives broken, and hearts darkened by shame. Your presence is a vigil, like the vigil prayers offered before the dawning of a religious feast. As the psalm 130 sings “I wait for the LORD, my soul waits and I hope for his word. My soul looks for the Lord more than sentinels for daybreak. More than sentinels for daybreak, let Israel hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is mercy, with him is plenteous redemption, and he will redeem Israel from all its sins.” (Ps. 130.5-8)

The work of Catholic Charities is another concrete instance when patience is practiced. Women and men come with their worries, their fears, confused, ashamed, literally scared to death. You listen and wait. Patient listening is often the most valuable response. In many cases, up to the moment when someone walks warily into a Catholic Charities, no one has listen to them. Charities gives the time that creates the space, the oasis, for God’s mercy to change hearts so that one changes course, walking in the way of life. Patience waits for the moment to speak the word, take the hand, wipe the tears, and a smile of grace begins to dawn on a face shadowed by despair.

Even in the parish, or perhaps especially in the parish, we must remember those words of St. Paul, “Love is patient. Love is kind.” Whether a fellow parishioner or the pastor, patience helps us propose,

persuade, and persevere. Patience believes in the truth of the social gospel and in the communion of the Church. We work for the communion of heart and mind, not just for what is right. Patient listening, again, can open all of us to learn and grow into the fullness of both the truth and the communion that Jesus desires for His Church.

Our Federal and State Capitol Buildings tempt us to despair and distain the possibility of any sound policy and authentic compassion for the life and dignity of the most vulnerable and innocent among us. This past year has been heartbreaking. Our patience is being tested but not betrayed because we are waiting for God. While we wait we must act as the good stewards, entrusted with the treasure of the gospel, until the Master returns. So we patiently persevere in the good work, in the good word, sowing the seeds of truth and mercy.

Patience believes in the words of St. Peter in his second letter, “What we await are new heavens and a new earth where, according to his promise, the justice of God will reside. So, beloved, while waiting for this, make every effort to be found without stain or defilement, and at peace in his sight. Consider that our Lord’s patience is directed toward salvation.” (II Pet. 3.13-15)