

Archbishop's Column – January 9, 2015

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TODAY'S CATHOLIC

A challenge for the New Year: Jesus' words and actions

The homily I delivered on Jan. 1, the Feast of Mary, Mother of God, is intimately joined with Christmas. The gospel is much the same as at the Mass at dawn on Christmas Day. But on Jan. 1, our attention was drawn to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the Mother of God.

From the very earliest days of our nation, Mary has been venerated by Catholics. Archbishop John Carroll of Baltimore placed the United States under the patronage of the Mother of God in 1791, about 50 years after San Fernando Cathedral was built. Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of God, holds a special place in the hearts of all Americans of the Western Hemisphere.

Mary's motherhood is a wonderful blessing from God that brings salvation to the world. On the octave of the birthday of the Prince of Peace, we honored his Mother who, by giving birth to the Savior, brought his peace to the world. That is why the Church also has designated January 1 as the World Day of Peace.

In his message for this 2015 World Day of Peace, Pope Francis focuses our attention on the teaching of Scripture and Church tradition that we are all sisters and brothers. He prays that "on the basis of our common calling to cooperate with God and all people of good will for the advancement of harmony and peace in the world, we may resist the temptation to act in a manner unworthy of our humanity."

The Holy Father then points out "the growing scourge" of the exploitation of persons by other persons and challenges us to promote interpersonal relations "marked by respect, justice, and love." This may sound rather simplistic to you and taken for granted by all people of faith and good will. But Pope Francis is thinking about a growing phenomenon in our world and has entitled his message: "No longer slaves, but brothers and sisters." Slaves?! In our world today? Unfortunately, yes! But isn't slavery against international law? Yes! But it exists and is on the increase!

The Holy Father points out that “millions of people today — children, women and men of all ages—are deprived of freedom and are forced to live in conditions akin to slavery.” He is thinking of:

- the many men and women laborers, including minors, subjugated in different sectors, whether formally or informally, in domestic or agricultural workplaces, or in the manufacturing or mining industry...
- the many migrants who, in their dramatic odyssey, experience hunger, are deprived of freedom, robbed of their possessions, or undergo physical and sexual abuse...
- those who, upon arriving at their destination after a grueling journey marked by fear and insecurity, are detained in at times inhumane conditions...
- those among them, who for different social, political and economic reasons, are forced to live clandestinely...
- those who, in order to remain within the law, agree to disgraceful living and working conditions, especially in those cases where the laws of a nation create or permit a structural dependency of migrant workers on their employers...
- persons forced into prostitution, many of whom are minors, as well as male and female sex slaves...
- all those persons, minors and adults alike, who are made objects of trafficking for the sale of organs, for recruitment as soldiers, for begging, for illegal activities, such as the production and sale of narcotics, or for disguised forms of cross-border adoption.

The Holy Father calls our attention to the deeper causes of slavery today, such as poverty, underdevelopment and exclusion, lack of access to education, scarce or even non-existent employment opportunities. Other causes of slavery “include corruption on the part of people willing to do anything for financial gain. Slave labor and human trafficking often require the complicity of intermediaries, be they law enforcement personnel, state officials, or civil and military institutions.” Still further causes include armed conflicts, violence, criminal activity and terrorism. Many people are kidnapped in order to be sold, enlisted as combatants, or sexually exploited, while others are forced to emigrate, leaving everything behind: their country, home, property, and even members of their family. They are driven to seek an alternative to these terrible conditions even at the risk of their personal dignity and their very lives.

My dear brothers and sisters, you may be wondering why we are dwelling on such a tragic topic — at the beginning of a new year! The Christmas season is not only about feeling warm and cozy. Jesus was not born in a nice home in a nice neighborhood. He entered a flawed, sinful world and came to proclaim good news and to establish God’s kingdom of justice, peace, harmony and love.

It is traditional for many to make New Year’s resolutions, even though we may often lack real commitment in what we resolve to do. Nevertheless, I urge you to join me — along with the Holy Father, Pope Francis, and Catholics and others throughout the world — in resolving to work for peace in our world by promoting and advocating interpersonal relations marked by respect, justice, and love. Let our motto for this year be: “No longer slaves, but brothers and sisters!”

May Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mother of God, teach us to be loving, compassionate, respectful and just sisters and brothers to everyone! Happy New Year to you, to your families and those entrusted to your care, especially those in most need.