

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

If I was convinced that you had all listened to the many talks, speeches, and homilies of our Holy Father this week, I could just say, “DITTO” and go sit down. Well, did you? How many have listened to what the Holy Father had to say? (C’mon raise your hands).

I’m not sure I believe all of you, so I’ll just reiterate a few points he was trying to make, and more especially, the point the Lord is making in our Gospel passage today. His good friend, John, is all upset when he confronts Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us. Jesus replies, “Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me For whoever is not against us is for us”.

What a great message for our polarized society: “whoever is not against us is for us”. That certainly seems to be the current theme of our social discourse today. It’s us against them. Liberal Democrats against conservative Republicans. Illegal immigrants against second or third generation descendants of immigrants. Christians against Muslims. Fundamentalists against scientists.

On those occasions when I have dared to relate the Gospel to current affairs, I’ve been accused of “being political”. Now it’s all over the airwaves and social media. Anyone who disagrees with the Gospel the Pope is proclaiming is convinced he’s on the other side. It’s us against them. Pick your side and GET READY TO RUMBLE!

The story is told of a Catholic missionary trying to establish a parish down in North Carolina back in the early 1900s. As I heard the story, the local Bible-belt Baptists “disrupted his Masses, rioted while he preached, started a pack of dogs fighting outside the little lean-too he was using as a church, loosed his horse, refused him food and drink, and gave two barrels of whiskey to his congregation. Apparently, it didn’t turn out quite as the Baptists intended. St. Matthew’s Parish in Charlotte, North Carolina, is today one of the largest Catholic communities in the nation, with a congregation of more than 5,000 households. Maybe our Baptist neighbors should give us a couple of barrels of whiskey?

The most natural thing in the world is to prefer people who are just like themselves. Sociologists even have a name for it—ethnocentrism. Many of us are uncomfortable around people who are different from us. It makes no difference how they are different.

A few years back, when everyone dressed in their Sunday best to go to church, anyone wearing jeans would have made some people uncomfortable. Today, in churches, where casual dress is the norm, a man dressed in a suit and tie or a woman wearing a hat with a stylish dress and high heels might make some people feel uncomfortable. We like people who are like us—who look like us, dress like us, come from the same kind of background, share the same language, the same values as us.

It is the most normal thing in the world for people to prefer people who are like them. The problem comes when discomfort turns to opposition, anger, distain, fear, and hatred. The problem gets worse when the other is ignored or made to feel like he or she is less than us because he or she is different.

Jesus said to his disciples, “For whoever is not against us is for us...” The Church of Jesus Christ is called to be a unifying force in the human family, not a divisive one.

Our nation and our world seem to be more and more fragmented. We see it everywhere we look. Government is but one example. Liberals, conservatives, fundamentalists of different religious traditions all over the world seem to be at one another’s throats.

Our Holy Father’s answer to this divisive fragmentation of our common humanity is open dialogue between persons. Let go of your pre-conceived notion of those whom you see as others and encounter the other as a person and when you do you will see Jesus in him or her.

When the disciples encountered the man using the name of Jesus to drive out demons when he was not “authorized” to do so, they were offended and told him to stop. The disciples apparently felt that they owned the Jesus franchise. Jesus told them to leave him alone. He wasn’t misusing Jesus’ name. He was doing good. Though he didn’t follow Jesus in exactly the same way or capacity the disciples did, he nevertheless followed him.

Then Jesus broadens his teaching to include not only affirming the man, but telling his disciples, “Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward. In this the Lord is telling his disciples and telling us that when one performs the smallest act of hospitality in his name that person will not lose his or her reward.

Jesus had no interest in awarding exclusive franchises. His desire was to develop relationships with people, not in causing divisions between them. Our Holy Father is calling us to bring Christ’s peace to the world. How can we bring peace if we are ourselves are divided?

As you all know Pope Francis was born and raised in Argentina of Italian immigrant parents. That makes him an American too, as are all people from South and Central America, as well as those from Canada. In fact, Spanish was the language of the earliest settlers in what would become the United States for about a hundred years until the English settled in Jamestown in 1607. It is a bit of arrogance that we English-speaking people who live in the United States of America consider ourselves alone to be Americans.

Being from Argentina, the Holy Father knows well the story behind the Christ of the Andes, a colossal statue of Christ, erected high up in the mountains. In 1899 the people of

Argentina and Chile were poised for war. Then an Argentine bishop appealed for peace between the two countries. A Chilean bishop took up his cause, and appealed the dispute to King Edward VII of England, whose decision settled the quarrel. The unused guns from both countries were then melted down to be used to erect Christ of the Andes on the highest mountain range between the two countries to be a sign of lasting peace.

That is our legacy as Christ's disciples. That is the work of peace to which our Holy Father calls us as a nation, as members of our global human family to whom the earth is our common home. However, his call is to do the work of healing division; to do the work of welcoming the stranger; to do the work of making peace, not just give lip-service to it.

As some of you know we have a small part of our church family who meets in our church each Saturday evening to celebrate Mass in Spanish. But because they come at 7:00 o'clock on Saturday evening, most of us aren't even aware of them. They are nameless and faceless strangers in our midst. That cannot continue. That has to change if we are to live the Gospel of Christ that our Holy Father has proclaimed.

Inspired by both this Gospel and the teaching of the Holy Father, I will begin taking classes on October 6th in Pastoral Spanish so that I can learn to celebrate Mass in Spanish. At 71, I doubt that my Spanish will ever be as good as Pope Francis' English, which he learned at 78 specifically for this trip to the United States. But, with God's help and your prayers, I will learn enough to make our Spanish-speaking sisters and brothers feel more welcome in our midst. Then, occasionally, we will celebrate bi-lingual Masses at our regularly scheduled Masses to better incorporate our Spanish-speaking sisters and brothers into the life of our parish. My hope and prayer is that we may come to see each other and speak to each other and come to know Jesus in one another as the Lord would have us.

I know there will be some among us who will say, "Well, they live here. They should learn English if they're going to be a part of our Church Family." To that complaint I can only say that the person who has spoken Spanish from birth tends to meet God in his or her native language, as does the person who speaks English from birth. I would also add that all of us will be enriched when we experience the deep devotion of our Mexican-American sisters and brothers; we will all be enlivened by the festiveness of the Puerto Rican-American spirituality; we will all be called to deeper contemplation in experiencing the Ecuadorean-American prayerfulness. And in this process of coming to see and hear and know each other, we will come to appreciate the depth of our common faith and come to see Jesus in each other.

Right now, as our Holy Father has done at the end of each of his talks and homilies, I ask only that you pray for me, that the Holy Spirit loosen my tongue that I may learn to pray with our Spanish-speaking sisters and brothers in the language of their birth.