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Keynote presentation by Fr. Jacek Orzechowski, OFM

“CARE FOR THE EARTH, CARE FOR THE POOR – LISTENING TO POPE FRANCIS.”

I feel privileged to offer this keynoted address at the Social Ministry Conference of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. I count it a special opportunity to share with you my thoughts on the call of Pope Francis to care for the poor and to safeguard God’s creation. Today also represents an opportunity for each of us to recommit ourselves to the Social Ministry of the Church, for, indeed, second only to worship, caring for each other and God’s creation embodies the mission that we all share by virtue of our Baptism.

It seems, especially fitting that we should gather in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Primary See of the Catholic Church in America. This was the See of John Carroll, our nation’s first Bishop and, truly, a giant in the American Catholicism. A man way before his time, Bishop Carroll was an early Catholic champion of the freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and ecumenical collaboration. Archbishop Carroll envisioned a more open, mission-oriented Church, engaged in promoting the common good of the larger community. His vision was a new Church for a new country. I hope that you will continue to be informed, inspired and empowered by this rich heritage and respond accordingly to the signs of the times.

We gather at a pivotal moment in the life of our Church and a critical juncture in the history of both our country and our civilization. As a Church, we have been called to a New Evangelization. An essential dimension of that call is the Church’s social mission of liberating human race from oppressive situations, freeing us from the snares that hold us back. We are no longer a weak minority group. The American Catholics represent the nation’s largest denomination. And yet, this is tempered by the fact that former Catholics represent the nation’s second largest group! Will the Catholic Church in America follow the pattern that we see in most of the European countries? Will it be able to make a drastic turn-around, prevent the exodus of young people and bring back to the fold those who have strayed or been “turned off” by our failure to live out the Gospel? The answer depends on us.

Pope Francis in less than a year has managed to spark the imagination of millions and has shown that by approaching others with humility and concern, we can spread the Gospel message of love and reconciliation. As American Catholics, the past two decades have been difficult. Quite understandably, we have been preoccupied by the clergy sex abuse scandal and moral questions surrounding the issues of abortion, marriage and homosexuality. Inadvertently, this seems to have diminished our focus on the Church’s larger social mission. There are more than 2,000 passages in Scripture that speak about the poor and social justice. The concern that

they express is at the core of our faith tradition. Pope Francis challenges us as the Church to recommit ourselves to it.

At this juncture in our nation history, there is so much at stake. We witness deepening social inequalities and dangerous polarization along the ideological fault-lines. Millions of undocumented immigrants are being scapegoated, excluded, and exploited. Every year, thousands of families are being torn apart. The influence of big money on our politics turns our democracy into oligarchy and hampers our efforts in working for the common good.

What role do our churches play? Do we walk by on the other side or do we try to help? Collectively, are we the Levite, the priest or the Good Samaritan? Regardless of our political affinities, Pope Francis challenges us to “get out of our comfort zones,” and “reach all the peripheries.” Why not enter into dialogue? Pope Francis chides us: “Do not be afraid of failure.... of getting bruised...” If you don’t cling to your own security, you will eventually encounter Christ in the “other”.

We are also at the critical juncture in the history of our civilization. What we do now will determine whether or not we will be able to halt our suicidal rush over the cliff of irreversible damage to our planet’s life-support system. For the countless generations unborn, it is the ultimate respect for life issue.

Our American addictions to dirty fossil fuels and hyper-consumption have greatly contributed to altering the basic chemistry of our atmosphere. Climate disruptions, ocean acidification, destruction of rainforests and massive extinctions of species carry a high price. This price is ultimately born by the world’s Poor. For far too many, the Market has become the standard that measures all and defines our politics. But, there are other possibilities, other values. As Catholics, we have a long tradition of bold ideas and faith-inspired social change. We can demand a reordering of our national priorities to include the healing of our Earth and restorative justice for the poor. Pope Francis bids us as the Church, “not to remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.” <http://www.hnp.org/jpic/pdf/HNP-Statement-on-Climate-Change.pdf>

In this keynoted address, I will elaborate on two challenges that face us all as Catholic Americans: care for the poor and care for the Earth. These two themes are among the core elements of the Pope Francis’ call to renewal. Over the next 25 minutes, I will highlight several statements from Pope Francis. And, since he himself insists that the Church has a “grave responsibility” to be involved in “ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times,” I will present the Holy Father’s insights in the context of the current social inequalities in the United States and the global threat of climate change. At the end of each one of the two themes, I am will point to signs of hope and suggest ways in which our parishes and schools could respond to them.

CARE FOR THE POOR

The care for the poor and the alleviation of poverty are central to the Gospel. To ignore these concerns, is to reject the message of Jesus Christ. In the latest papal apostolic exhortation, we read that – and I quote - “the Pope loves everyone, rich and poor alike, but he is obliged in the name of Christ to remind all that the rich must help, respect and promote the poor. “ Who are the poor and most vulnerable in our country? They are disproportionately women and children, the immigrants, African-Americans, the elderly... Pope Francis also reminds us that, “among the vulnerable for whom the Church wishes to care with particular love and concern are unborn children,” and that, “this defense of unborn life is closely linked to the defense of each and every other human being.” The Holy Father calls us to be consistent in our care for the poor and in our support for life. These two are distinct but inseparable. And yet, there is a split in our society and our church between those for whom the issue of abortion appears to be the only moral issue worthy of attention, and those who focus exclusively on the issues of economic or environmental justice while turning the blind eye on the plight of the unborn. This is a lamentable division. It is also a scandalous division in that it rends the whole-cloth of the Christian message into rags of discord.

Everyone admires Pope Francis’ personal outreach to the poor and marginalized. He washes the feet of the young delinquents. He models simplicity. But, the Holy Father’s love of the poor is radical in a sense that he is willing to raise difficult questions: Why so many people are poor? Why there is so much inequality? What can we do about it? Let us consider a few facts that underline the urgency of dealing with the issue of wealth inequality:

- ❖ The world’s 85 wealthiest individuals hold as much wealth as half the world population.
- ❖ The top 1% of Americans own 40% of the nation's total wealth. The bottom 80% own just 7.0% of the wealth of this nation. www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPKKQnijnsM
- ❖ In 2012, in the U.S. the top 40 hedge fund managers and traders were paid a combined \$16 billion, equivalent to the wages of 400,000 ordinary workers.
- ❖ In the U.S., the wealthiest one per cent captured 95 per cent of post-financial crisis growth since 2009, while the bottom 90 per cent sunk deeper into poverty.

As the rich have become richer, they have also demanded to be taxed less, thus limiting the ability of government to care for the poor. This has resulted in disproportionate budget cuts in food stamps and other assistance programs vital for the poor. Far too often, the poor are blamed for their situation, labeled as lazy and branded as undeserving. Not infrequently, they are excluded from democratic process, denied access to health care and quality education. Adding insult to injury, some elected officials, blinded by their ideology, justify their positions by callously claiming that they are actually helping the poor. Those attitudes may be rooted in what Pope Francis refers to as “the culture of prosperity’ and ‘globalization of indifference.” Care for those most vulnerable is at the core of our faith tradition. We never find any distinction there between the “Deserving Poor” and the “Un-Deserving Poor.” The Gospel of

Jesus must be our moral compass, not the trickle-down theories or a belief in the sacred Market.

Pope Francis asserts that, “inequality is the root of social ills.” He says that, *“As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world’s problems or, for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills.”*

Most of our Catholic parishes do a wonderful job helping the poor through charity. But charity is not enough. We will not be able to heal our society from the scourge of poverty by simply dispensing Band-Aids. Pope Francis urges Catholics to get involved in politics. “We can't play the role of Pontius Pilate and wash our hands of it,” he says. Anticipating those who may disagree with him and complain that politics is “too dirty”, the Pope adds that, if this is so, then it's "because Christians haven't gotten involved in the politics with an evangelical spirit."

Pope Francis condemns “the worship of the ancient golden calf.” “It has returned,” he says, “in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose.” The Holy Father reminds us that Market is not God,” and that, in the Catholic tradition, “not to share one’s wealth with the poor is to steal from them.”

SIGNS OF HOPE

The joy of the Gospel calls us to “say no to a sterile pessimism.” “People of faith are needed who.... point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive.” There is an impressive caravan of solidarity in the Catholic Church that gives me a lot of hope. I’d like to offer a few examples:

1. Catholic Relief Services, which provides assistance to over 60 million people in 99 countries. CRS is not only involved in charity, it also deals with the root causes of marginalization. It empowers the poor, and provides opportunities for Catholics in the US to be involved in advocacy. How many of you have heard and taken advantage of the joint initiative between CRS and USCCB called Catholic Confront Global Poverty Campaign? Initiatives like this make me proud to be Catholic. Check it out, use it, share it in your parish, school, and ministry.
2. Here in this archdiocese, you are blessed with various justice and peace educational and advocacy opportunities; for example, Catholic Charities Parish Social Ministries, JustFaith, Beyond the Boundaries, Murphy Initiative for Justice & Peace, Pax Christi. I hope you’ll take a full advantage of those blessings available to you.
3. Maryland Catholic Conference is another example of a collective Catholic voice in the public forum, speaking on the issues spanning economic justice, respect for life, immigration. A few weeks ago, I was in Annapolis for MCC Lobby Night with a group of 40 St. Camillus parishioners, the vast majority of them Latino. A number of them were undocumented immigrants, yet they proudly claimed that they belong there, that that were Christ’s disciples

sent to advocate for the increase of the minimum wage, protecting the unborn, championing the children attending the Catholic schools.

WHAT IS OURS TO DO?

In addition to offering you the signs of hope` I`d like to present a few challenges. It is something that I`ve tried to respond to in my ministry. If we truly take to heart the call to New Evangelization and respond to the call of Pope Francis, we need to help our local churches take seriously the social dimension of the Gospel. We must do what we can to better integrate it into our liturgies, Faith Formation and even budget considerations. Sunday Mass represents the principal – if not the only - opportunity for the vast majority of Catholics to connect with the Church. How well do the homilies we hear, music we sing, Prayers of the Faithful we offer reflect and respond to the signs of the times and the concerns of the poor and most vulnerable? Pope Francis keeps saying that the concern for the poor is a key criterion of authenticity of our faith. Do our parish reconciliation services reflect that or do they ignore social sins and focus the individual failings? I also mentioned budgets. Granted some of our churches might be struggling financially. However, it`s still worth asking if the ministry of charity and justice is given a serious consideration in setting budget priorities for parishes and Catholic institutions.

If your answer is somehow ambiguous then, why not reach out to your local priest, DRE, Youth Minister, or some other person with authority and engage him or her in a conversation about what could be done better and how you might support those efforts.

CARE FOR THE EARTH

On the Solemnity of Saint Joseph marking the inauguration of his pontificate, Pope Francis called all people of good will to protect the whole of God`s creation. In his homily, he pleaded, not once but six times:

“Let us protect with love all that God has given us.... the whole of creation... each person, especially the poorest. (let us) protect ourselves... Whenever we fail to live up to the responsibility for caring for God`s creation and for our brothers and sisters, the way is opened to destruction... to the ‘Herods who plot death, wreak havoc.’”

Is Pope Francis employing hyperbole? Not when we look at facts and consider the pattern of climate disruptions. Half of the continental U.S. has been freezing this winter. And yet, Alaska, Brazil, southern Africa, most of Europe, large parts of China and most of Australia experienced extremely unseasonable warm weather this winter. For the earth as a whole, it was the forth-warmest January on record.

In August of last year, half of the city of Manila was submerged after some of the Philippines heaviest rains, impacting some 600,000 residents. A few months later, the deadliest typhoon ever recorded killed over 6,000 people.

A year and a half ago, Super storm “Sandy,” the largest Atlantic hurricane on record pounded the Eastern Seashore. More than 280 people lost their lives while material damages reached \$68 billion.

These examples tell a story in lives and suffering – the same story that scientists detail with statistics and projections. Consider the following:

Since 1980, the overall volume of the Arctic Sea ice has decreased by 70%.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYaubXBfVqo&feature=player_embedded

As the polar ice caps shrink and the glaciers in Greenland and Antarctic melt, the sea levels are rising. According to the scientists by the end of this century, the sea-level rise may reach 6 feet.

The northern regions are warming up much faster pushing us ever closer to a dangerous “tipping point:” at which methane (CH₄) will be released from the Arctic permafrost along with CO₂. www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuY7GnmabfA And there is a lot of it locked in frozen soil: about four times more that all the carbon emitted by human activity in modern times. www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLCgybStZ4g

We are not far from the tipping point. If it happens it will be run-away train, barreling down on your children and grandchildren, my nieces and nephews.

One of the nation’s most respected climatologist, Dr. James Hansen says that if want to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed CO₂ levels in atmosphere must be kept below 350 ppm.

However, the human activities are responsible for the current level of CO₂ that has reached 400 ppm. If this continues, by the end of the century we can expect the CO₂ concentration to reach 1,000 ppm. To put it in perspective, the last time that carbon dioxide (CO₂) level was above 500ppm was over 36 million years ago. Human beings had yet to make their appearance while crocodiles swam the Arctic, and Antarctica was covered by forest. Sea level was at least 300 feet higher than it is today.

These are sobering facts that should shake us from our lethargy and rouse us to action.

The consequences of climate change are born disproportionately by the poor and the future generations. It is estimated that between 250 and 500 million people could become refugees by 2050 as a result of climate change. Dramatic flooding of vast costal areas, desertification and the loss of arable land will impact hundreds of millions. Climate change is likely lead to widespread hunger and famines. There is a specter of violent social unrests, a rise in extremism, and overwhelming national security challenges. <http://billmovers.com/2013/09/06/drought-helped-spark-syrias-civil-war-is-it-the-first-of-many-climate-wars-to-come>

There is one more thing I must mention: In the last century and a half the world has seen one of the fastest mass extinction of species in the planet’s history. As many 60% of species could be wiped out. Squandering the inheritance of 14 billion years of evolution would be a sacrilege, a

collective sin and insult to our Creator. What is at stake is our moral and intellectual integrity of our Church.

I would be remiss, however, if I failed to mention that Pope Francis, along with his two predecessor, framed the environmental crisis as a manifestation of a deeper, spiritual crisis effecting our human family. In other words, there is a serious problem with the environmental because there is a serious problem with human beings. The two are related, and you can't really solve one without dealing with the other. Allow me to illustrate it by sharing with you a poignant short story from a book, *"Hot, Flat, and Crowded"* by Thomas Friedman. *"He tells about a CEO who was having to babysit for his young daughter. He was trying to read the paper but was totally frustrated by the constant interruptions. When he came across a full page of the NASA's photo of the Earth from space, he got a brilliant idea. He ripped it up into small pieces and told his child to try to put it back together. He then settles in for what he expected to be a good half-hour of peace and quiet. But only a few minutes had gone by before the child appeared at his side with a big grin on her face. 'You've finished already?' he asked. 'Yep,' she replied. 'So how did you do it?' 'Well, I saw there was a picture of a person on the other side, so when I put the person together, the Earth got put together too...."*

SIGNS OF HOPE

In his Apostolic Exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel," Pope Francis calls us to say: No to Sterile Pessimism. He writes: "We feel that we must disagree with those prophets of doom who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand. In our times, divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by human effort and even beyond all expectations, are directed to the fulfillment of God's superior and inscrutable designs, in which everything, even human setbacks, leads to the greater good of the Church."

Yet there are encouraging signs of hope, promising new approaches and fresh opportunities. Christians, Jews, Muslims and others begin to rediscover that care for creation is integral to our respective faith traditions. The great religions have accepted the challenge of shrinking the carbon footprint and integrate environmental justice into their teaching and advocacy. How many of you have heard about Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, Interfaith Power and Light, Green Faith, Lent 4.5 Christian Simplicity, Franciscan Earth Corps?

Young people are another signs of hope for me. They are realizing that their future is being destroyed. And they are rising up, claiming their moral voice and organizing for justice. You may have heard about movements such as *PowerShift* or *iMatter Youth Council*. Many of those young men and women are now leading the efforts to help their colleges and universities divest from fossil fuels. The young people have taken a prophetic role of exposing the contemporary "Herods who plot death and wreak havoc." That is, they shed light of truth on the machinations of the powerful interests that spend millions of dollars confusing the public and derailing climate legislation.

Another sign of hope is the Vatican being the first country in the world that is now carbon neutral. Just take a look at those extensive solar panels. Close to home, we have Mount St. Mary University, in Emmitsburg. It's MD's largest operational solar installations.

Responding to climate change with urgency and vigor points to a promising new path especially for the state of Maryland. Maryland is considered to be the Persian Gulf of offshore wind energy. And why is that? There's enough harnessable wind power in the Mid-Atlantic Bight to create electricity equal to 70 percent of ALL of America's current generation. An investment in clean energy generates 3 to 4 times as many jobs as investments in fossil fuels. This represents amazing opportunities for new employment, economic revival of cities like Baltimore, better health, and stronger families.

WHAT IS OURS TO DO?

As leaders in the Catholic church- ordained or lay – we need to help incorporate care for creation into the core of life and ministry of our parishes and schools. It can no longer be a peripheral issue for us. It's a profoundly moral issue. If we are oblivious to it, it will cost us dearly. We will lose our credibility and moral integrity especially vis-à-vis the young people.

Pope Francis has spoken against the culture of waste. We must make our parishes more energy efficient and supportive of clean energy. In the spirit of Pope Francis and Archbishop John Carroll, our parishes and schools could reach out to other faith and civic groups and work together on addressing local environmental issues. For example, we could champion efforts to clean up the Chesapeake Bay. We could hold up a faith dimension of protecting the Bay. What a great opportunity to share the Gospel vision and demonstrate how relevant it is!

CONCLUSION

Care for the Poor and Care for the Earth represent threads – the wharf and the woof – that that make up the fabric of Christian mission. Our Faith defines our values and orders our priorities. It also should instill in us a passion for action.

As Gospel-filled people we join with St. Francis in praying to become Instruments of God's peace – overcoming hatred with love, injury with pardon, doubt with faith, despair with hope, darkness with light and sadness with joy.

Ours is a nation, Church, and the world, are experiencing change. For some this may cause them to hesitate, to long for times past. But, for the committed Christian, times of change are times of opportunity and renewal. 800 years ago, St. Francis of Assisi responded to God's call to rebuild God's house by embracing the leper, solidarity with the poor and reaching out with fraternal love to all God's creatures. May God teach us what is ours to do. Peace and all good.