

I have suggested that you at St. Matthew's can respond to your Lenten theme "We thirst for You, O Lord", by our efforts in evangelization and in living out the social teaching of the church.

In this conference, then, I would like to offer some reflections on the social teaching of the Church. Let me begin by citing the opening paragraph of the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes; "The joys and hopes, the fears and anxieties of those of this age, especially those who are poor and afflicted, are as well the joys and hopes, the fears and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts."

These words flow from the tradition of other-centeredness which is at the core of Christ's messianic vocation and at the heart of the Gospel message. This is captured succinctly in the following passage taken from the Gospel of Luke. "Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he said to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'"

In this passage, Jesus is telling his hearers that he was the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy of Isaiah; that He was anointed by the Holy Spirit who empowered him to give sight to the blind, release to prisoners, liberty to captives, and Good News to the poor.

Now, this activity on Christ's part, this service to and involvement with others, exercised under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, were not something peripheral to his mission, not something optional that could be accepted or rejected at his pleasure but these were an integral and essential part of his messianic vocation.

For example, when the disciples of John the Baptist, who was imprisoned, came to Jesus to ask if he were the Messiah or were they to expect another, the response Jesus gives is extremely significant: "Go and tell John all that you have seen and heard, the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, lepers are cleansed, and the poor have the Good News preached to them."

In response to this question about who He is and the nature of his mission, Jesus did not appeal to His divine origins or to His messianic titles but to his care and concern for the poor, vulnerable and marginalized.

Consequently, if our lives today are to be an extension of Christ's life and mission, they too must be incarnational, that is, characterized by a profound concern for people and their concrete human situation and rooted in a response to God's love that finds its full expression in our love for and involvement with others. Like Jesus, the person for others, we, too, are called to share our time, talents, gifts, energies and resources, indeed our very selves, with others.

While there are many ways in which we might do this, in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, the primary sign of such stewardship is care and concern for the poor and needy. That the Good News is proclaimed to the poor and that the needs of the orphan stranger and widow are met have always been presented in our Judeo-Christian Tradition and Christian spirituality as the infallible sign of the presence of God's kingdom among us.

In other words, the way we take into account the poor among us and the way in which they fit into our plan of life tell us a great deal about ourselves and our own state of spiritual health. Unless we seriously address ourselves to the needs of our suffering brothers and sisters in the world and society around us, we run the risk of losing that which we already have, namely, the right to be sons and daughters of that kingdom founded by our heavenly Father.

If, therefore, we truly believe in God's kingdom and if we are seeking to advance that kingdom in our day, then the poor must rank very high in our values and in our priority system; otherwise we are deceiving ourselves and it is not God's kingdom that we are advancing but our very own.

That is why we must have "a preferential option for the poor." We must recognize that a wound in one is a hurt in each; that as long as one child falls asleep hungry at night, my stomach hurts; that as long as an elderly person can't afford heat or fears tomorrow, there is a chill in my bones; or that as long as one person is treated with lack of dignity, I am shamed. Because if one person is oppressed, manipulated or disregarded, then it is not someone else who is

debased, but all of us are. For this is the nature of the interdependence we have upon one another as members of the human family.

Yes, it is a profound Biblical truth that the face of the poor is the face of the Lord. To the extent that we cut the poor out of our lives, to that extent do we shut ourselves off from the channel of God's love and grace. On the other hand, to the extent that we reach out to our hurting brothers and sisters in the community around us, to that extent do we prepare ourselves for union with our eternal God.

More and more, then, you our laity must become aware of the teaching of the Church on cutting edge social, economic, medical and moral issues and seek to articulate this teaching in the public arena.

I underscore this point because, unfortunately, Catholic social justice advocacy and ministry emanating from the exhortations of the Scriptures, papal encyclicals and bishops' pastoral letters still remain a secret for most of our people. A recent survey revealed that less than 40 percent of Catholics including clergy and religious, are familiar with Catholic social teaching and fail to realize that this teaching is an integral part of our faith heritage – as much a part of our tradition as the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments.

We, then, must make Catholic social teaching part of the credenda (the things to be believed) which then become part of the agenda (the things to be done) which the believer must implement.

I emphasize this point because as bishop of Albany I served as chairperson for the Public Policy Committee of the New York State Catholic Conference for 37 years until my retirement almost 4 years ago. This often necessitated meeting with the governor and state commissioners or testifying before the Legislature. Through this experience, I learned quickly that when we bishops advocate on behalf of public policy issues with those in state or federal government, our elected representatives often feel free to dismiss our concerns because they know that frequently we bishops are like generals without armies, and, thus, to ignore our pleadings will not cost them at the polls.

If, then, our Catholic Christian vision and philosophy of life, especially as it pertains to the poor, and marginalized is to be translated into reality, then it is imperative that you our laity become aware of the issues confronting our society, be educated on these issues through the lens of our social teaching and be willing to let our elected officials know of your support of or opposition to particular public-policy concerns.

I am convinced that if the voice of the church is to be heard in our very secularized and pluralistic society then, it is the laity who must fulfill this role and do it with knowledge, civility, integrity, and enthusiasm.

Now the Church's reflection on this Scriptural revelation over the centuries has given rise to certain values and principles: values and principles which must be normative for us as Christians in no matter what social, cultural, or political situation we find ourselves.

While these values and principles have been stated in different ways in various historical contexts, I would suggest that they can be summarized as follows: 1) Every person has been created by God with a dignity that is unique, sacred and inviolable. This transcendent dignity of the human person is a profound religious truth that appears from the very first chapter of Genesis to the last line of the New Testament, and the defense of human dignity has been and must continue to be the preeminent and perennial task of the Church in its teaching and social witness. 2) From this basic dignity there flow certain rights: The right to life, and the right to adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, education and employment opportunities for one's self and one's family. 3) There is a solidarity within the human family. For the human person is essentially a social being, and human rights are rights held in community. Therefore, we need to establish social institutions and structures that facilitate the achievements of these basic human rights and which reflect the dignity of every person. And it is the role of the government and of other mediating institutions within society such as the church to effect those social changes which will insure that the common good is promoted and that basic human rights are protected.

This belief in the transcendent dignity of the human person and of the spectrum of rights and responsibilities each person possesses, precisely because he or she is human, form the foundation of our social teaching. And this teaching is most timely in light of the grave and spreading tendency in our day to reduce the human person to the level of a thing, a pawn of economic or political interest, a commodity, a unit of production or a mere instrument for the purpose of scientific or medical progress.

It should be noted, furthermore, that this conviction about the dignity of the human person cannot be understood in terms of purely materialistic or atheistic constructs. Rather, this dignity must be perceived in the light of a destiny that surpasses the limits of this world and that is ultimately rooted in a relationship with our loving God.

Moreover, this understanding of the sacredness of the human person should impel us individually and collectively to be more passionate in our defense of human rights and human dignity; more determined in our quest for racial justice and social equality; more enthusiastic in promoting our causes; more resolute in our attempt to establish genuine community and more humane and compassionate in our ministry of healing and reconciliation.

It is also apparent that this vision we have about the sacred dignity of the human person, rooted as it is in our relationship with a loving God and in our solidarity with our own brothers and sisters in the human family, should be the motivating, animating and sustaining influence in all of our efforts to respond to human need. For it is only with this vision that the maintenance of a day care center, the care of the elderly, the placement of a child, the service to the unwed mother, the rehabilitation of the addict or the alcoholic, the outreach to the poor, the mentally ill or differently abled, the creation of affordable housing, the care for the migrant, the refugee and the dying, promoting environmental sensitivity or the participation in a public policy network or advocacy coalition make any sense.

And it is only with this vision that these programs and services we render can be raised from the level of the impersonal, the indifferent, the self-serving, the paternalistic, the condescending or mundane to the level of the transcendental, wherein our life and ministry truly become effective signs of the God's compassionate love and a living testimony to our fundamental scriptural belief that all men and women are our brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus bound together by a unity that demands justice and charity.

In short, what I am attempting to say is that we in the Church must appreciate and rejoice in that unique dignity we have to be living instruments of God's healing and liberating love in a world and society that vitally needs such and as part of a person-centered tradition that extends from the call of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures to care for the poor, the stranger, the orphan and widow; to St. James' exposition to early Christian community on the nature of selfless love, to 20th-century icons like Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa, Archbishop Oscar Romero and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who made a vocation of demonstrating the congruence of our Judeo-Christian vision and belief with service to and advocacy on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.

This brings me to the pragmatic question of how do we do this today? Engulfed as we are by our own personal and family problems and worn down by the demands of work responsibilities and other obligations, how do we give flesh and blood to these values and principles? How do we translate this social teaching beyond the pages of Sacred Scriptures, Papal social encyclicals and

Bishops' pastoral letters into our homes, our neighborhoods, our parishes, our cities, towns and rural communities? How do we communicate such in our labor halls, our PTA meetings, our manufacturing associations, our political caucuses, our legislative chambers, in short, in all of those places where the Good News can become more than mere theory, more than pious clichés and churchy platitudes.

Let me suggest a threefold response to this question which is very much steeped in our Church tradition. First, we have tended to respond to this challenge by programs of direct service to the poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged, as well as for the emotionally and spiritually impoverished. This is what Catholic Charities, for example, does superbly. This thrust must continue, given the developments that are taking place in welfare reform and managed care wherein people inevitably fall through the cracks, so to speak; and given the need to restore a more personalized dimension to human service delivery, in light of the checkbook approach of responding to human need that has arisen in the past few decades or so.

People today are very much fed up with bureaucracies, with specialization, with an antiseptic computerized approach to life wherein everyone is reduced to a number or a statistic, or stereotyped by one's IQ range. But people today want to be accepted for themselves, for their own unique history, for their own distinctive story.

Thus, I would submit that we could have perfect programs in model communities, offer well-developed educational, social and liturgical services in our parishes, provide every one with a decent home and a guaranteed annual income, and still not get at the heart of what ails modern men and women. It is only when we give testimony to what a person means and to what love means that we do something that is truly significant.

In other words, while it is fine to give food to the hungry, to offer clothing and furniture to the disadvantaged, to work with the developmentally disabled, or to respond to an emergency appeal by writing a check, what is even more essential that we reach out to these vulnerable persons in the community and society around us and say to them by word or deed or gesture or facial expression: "I care about you; I am concerned about you; I believe in you; I love you and I want you to have life to the full."

Second, direct service -- good, beneficial and indispensable as such may be -- is not enough in the complex world and society in which we live today.

For example, a tutorial program for inner-city youngsters can be totally inadequate if the educational system in the community is inferior. A cup of cold water can be useless if that water is polluted by industries that dump their refuse into our rivers and streams. Or aid given to another can become a mockery if given in ways that debase or demean the other.

Also, we must recognize that in the global village in which we live today, our actions or omissions in the United States can affect the lives of millions of people the world over. By way of illustration, a 10% surtax levied in Washington can mean unemployment for tens of thousands of Korean textile workers. The covert activities of the CIA can mean physical destitution for another nation and moral decimation for our own. Or billions of dollars expended in our defense budget can usurp resources desperately needed to care for the poor both at home and abroad.

That is why we in the Church must not only develop particular programs that respond to specified human need but we must also address the root causes of social decay. We must be willing to involve ourselves with the messy business of social change. We must be willing to stand with the poor, powerless and defenseless in their hour of need, and not merely be content with applying band-aids to deep wounds, or with helping people better adjust to their suffering; but we must also confront those persons and those institutions that oppress, manipulate or destroy others, be such the members of government, the business community or the church herself.

This is precisely what our late Holy Father Pope Paul VI meant when he said: "We in the church must shift from a policy that seeks to alleviate the results of oppression to one that seeks to eliminate the causes of oppression."

Unfortunately, however, this advocacy component becomes very difficult given the secularization of our culture. America remains a religious society but increasingly religion is being relegated to our private lives as an aggressively secular culture systematically seeks to exclude religion from all public space. Religion is deemed acceptable for private life, but, when its adherents seek to gain admittance to the public arena, they are told "to check their bags at the door." Under the guise of enforcing an exaggerated notion of official "neutrality," the contemporary secular milieu actually promotes its own secular outlook to a privileged position in shaping public opinion and public policy. Under the guise of promoting tolerance, the secularist outlook fosters the very intolerance it claims to abhor.

In other words, there has developed the phenomenon in our national life, that would seek to rule religiously based values "out of order" in the public arena simply because their roots are religious. In this view, pluralism means a public square purged of intolerance – which secularists define as the belief in exclusive truth claims which define right and wrong. They believe that any religious voice in a pluralistic society, will either infect the body politic with unhealthy doses of fanaticism and ill will, or will contribute to the type of extremism and polarization along religious lines which have plagued Europe and the Mideast for centuries. Their fears are fueled further by the growing political voice of Evangelical Christians, the efforts of some bishops to use the threat of excommunication to dictate to political leaders or to tell Catholics how to vote and the omnipresent threat of Islamic extremism.

Hence, we have the anomaly in this country that in private, religion enjoys an overwhelming majority status, - over 70% of Americans still adhere to some religious tradition - but in public, religion has a definite minority status or no status at all. It is either eliminated entirely from our public space, or if it does exist at all in our public affairs, our entertainment, our intellectual and artistic endeavors, it exists uneasily, disguised on its very best and blindest behavior, preferably as a form of vague non-denominationalism.

Consequently, we in the faith community are struggling with the challenge of how best to engage the public debate in a way that combats an elite secularism that is fundamentally antithetical to a spiritual message.

Now that there be such a spiritual voice, I believe, is especially important given the nature of the issues which now confront American society. There is a spectrum of questions, running from in vitro fertilization through the use of US military might and how best to stimulate the economy and to address the growing gap in income inequality about which the public debate is not purely technical or practical but is filled with moral content. On an increasing number of issues it is impossible today to formulate wise policy without asking what constitutes "good policy" in a morally normative sense.

Every day, technology produces choices for us which previous generations could not have imagined. In the past three generations, for example, we have cracked the genetic code and smashed the atom. Neither these nor the revolution they symbolize can be understood apart from moral analysis. Increasingly, then, a key policy question is, "When we can do almost anything, how shall we decide what we ought to do?" Or to put it more sharply still, "When we can do almost anything, how do we decide what we ought never do?" It is precisely, I believe, because this question is implicated in so many public policy

issues today, that it is critical for faith communities and spiritual leaders to be able to enter the public policy debate.

While there is no single or official position on this issue of religion and politics or the separation of Church and State, our Roman Catholic stance has been shaped largely by the Jesuit theologian Father John Courtney Murray.

Known as the "Theologian of the First Amendment," Father Murray provided the church with a theological understanding of its role in a democracy and offered society a philosophical grounding for religious pluralism. His fundamental thesis is that in the United States, civil discourse is structured by religious pluralism. The condition of pluralism is the coexistence in one society of groups holding divergent and incompatible views with regard to religious questions. The genius of American pluralism is that it provides for the religious freedom of each citizen and of every faith. However, it does not purchase tolerance at the price of expelling moral and religious values from the public life of the nation. Rather, Fr. Murray argues, the goal of our American constitutional system is to provide space for religious substance in society but not for a religious state.

In society, Murray argues, churches, synagogues, mosques and temples are voluntary associations free to address the public agenda of the nation. More specifically, they are voluntary associations with a disciplined capacity to analyze the moral-religious significance of public issues.

If, however, the right of faith communities to speak in the public arena is to be both recognized and guaranteed, it must also be acknowledged that there are limits on the religious role in the public arena. These limits relate not only to whether religious bodies enter the public debate but also to how they advocate a public case.

The central question in evaluating the role of religion in politics, then, is not whether a particular faith community has the right to speak or sides with the left or the right on a particular issue, but whether it allows the issue to be made public that is, open to deliberation through rational discourse.

It is on this point, I believe, that there is often a major difference between our Catholic view of religion and politics and the posture of some other religious groups, especially those of the religious right. This is also the conclusion of one of the religious right's most sympathetic observers, the late Father Richard John

Neuhaus, who was the editor of the journal First Things. He viewed the new religious right's, problem as follows:

It wants to enter the political arena making claims on the basis of private truths. However, the integrity of politics itself requires that such a proposal be resisted. Public decisions must be made by arguments that are public in character. A public argument is transsubjective, that is, not derived from sources of revelation or disposition that are essentially private and arbitrary...fundamentalist morality, which is derived from beliefs that cannot be submitted to examination by public reason, is essentially a private morality. If enough people who share that morality are mobilized, it can score victories in the public arena. But every such victory is a setback in the search for a public ethic.

In entering the political policy debate, then, members of faith communities must present arguments that are truly public, that is open to rational examination and debate, and assessable, understandable and, hopefully, persuasive both to coreligionists and to citizens of whatever background.

Ultimately, therefore, it is the substance of the religious moral vision that a religious body brings to the public policy debate that should determine its impact in the public arena.

It seems to me that the First Amendment addressed this issue clearly in its separation clause. Separation of the church from the state does not mean separating the church from society.

Those who appeal to the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state as a means of denying to religious leaders or faith communities the right to participate in the public debate fail to grasp the fundamental vision of our Founding Fathers, who established the separation clause, not to silence the religious voice, but to strengthen it; not to fetter religious communities, but to free them to contribute to the public life of our nation.

Inclusion of explicitly religious moral values into the public debate, however, is a delicate and demanding task. Members of religious communities bear a twofold responsibility: to keep the moral factors central in the public argument and to set an example of how this can be done with sensitivity, rationality, civility and courtesy. In other words, we of the faith community must demonstrate pragmatically that we can keep our deepest convictions and still maintain our civil courtesy; that we can test others' arguments but not question their motives; that we can presume good will even when we disagree strongly; and that we can relate the best of religion and the best of politics in the service of each other.

Moreover, I think it is evident that to advocate on behalf of peace and justice at times will thrust us into the risky area of controversy where we ourselves may be challenged, attacked, ridiculed or ostracized. This is truly the cost of discipleship and the price that we must be willing to pay. For failure to place ourselves in this position may involve complicity with forces and factors that run contrary to Scriptural values and this, then, becomes the very essence of social sin.

Third, and finally, I would underscore the fact that our ministry of charity and social justice advocacy must be rooted in prayer. For direct service and advocacy without prayer can become very humanistic and very secularistic, geared toward making things more comfortable and palatable here and now, but failing to point to that eternal Now to which each of us is destined.

Service and advocacy without prayer only create a false sense of security, rooted in the fickle and fleeting ideas, values and movements of human wisdom but failing to communicate that life-giving power and strength that can only come from trust in the Lord God and the Good News revealed in the sacred Scriptures.

I cannot emphasize this strongly enough because over the years I have observed so many people, well-motivated and well intentioned in their commitment to help others and to rectify injustice, who quickly become discouraged and disillusioned because, in placing all emphasis on human measures and natural solutions, they have forgotten that they are primarily called to be believers in Someone and Something, namely, in God and the divine plan of life. When this happens, they soon drop by the wayside or move on to other pursuits because they find themselves bringing not the Lord to others but only their own ideas, values and opinions which cannot withstand the test of time, nor endure the heat of day; and finding not God in others but only petty, weak human beings like themselves who quickly sap their strength, harden their hearts and dampen their spirits.

Therefore, I am convinced that the place where we must find the relationship between our faith and our service to or advocacy on behalf of others is in our prayer.

For it is only in prayer that we can touch base with the Lord. It is only in prayer that we can see ourselves as we really are and as God sees us. And it is only in prayer that we can overcome the frustrating, unpleasant and totally incomprehensible aspects of daily life and being to those whom we are called to serve the love of God whom we have met and known in our moments of prayerful reflection.

There is, however, one form of prayer that should always be foremost for us Catholic Christians: the Eucharist. For it is at the Eucharist that the Church comes together as Church; it is at Eucharist that we gain fresh insights into who it is we are and what it is we are called to be. And it is at Eucharist that we are energized to change our wants, our wills, our lives and our desires. And if this ongoing conversion, which is at the heart of the Christian life, does not take place at the Eucharist, it will probably not take place at all.

Father John Haughey, the Jesuit theologian states there is a phrase we memorialize at Eucharist which can help bring about this conversion: the phrase “this is my Body which has been given for you. Do this.”

What does that phrase mean? Fr. Haughey suggests that the style or disposition of each person who comes to the Eucharist table must be that of Jesus who said, “I am bread; I am bread broken. I am bread broken for others. Do this in memory of me.”

A Eucharist, then, which does not evoke within its participants a real identification with others, others who are suffering, others who are in need, is a Eucharist which is celebrated according to our own mindset and not in accord in the mind of Jesus.

And if we would celebrate Eucharist in this radical sense of Eucharist, if we would prepare ourselves at Eucharist to become break broken and wine poured out for others, then, this would dramatically change our own motivation and our own lifestyle. It would lead us to change our priorities and to work tirelessly to advance God’s kingdom of peace and justice in our day.

In conclusion, I would note that the challenges which I’ve been speaking about these two days may prompt us to become overwhelmed and at times to feel that we are failing or not doing enough. But we must remember, as the former Superior of the Dominicans, theologian Father Timothy Radcliffe, notes: “The archetypal Christian community was the Last Supper. Think what a dismal failure that community was. One of the disciples sold Jesus out; another went on to deny him, and the rest ran away. Jesus failed to gather them into a community on that last night (after three years of intensive formation), so we should not be surprised that we do better than he did.

“What Jesus did was to offer the sacrament of communion; a sign of the kingdom that is to come as a gift in its own good time. If the Church is not the great and dynamic community we want it to be, then this may not be a sign of pastoral failure at all. Sometimes we can do no more than enact signs of what is to come.”

Yes, as Father Radcliffe suggests, the Last Supper is our foundational story, the story of God's covenant with us and with all of humanity. The paradox of this story is that our community was founded just at the moment it was in the process of breaking up. And that has been true down through the course of Christian history.

And just as at the Last Supper the moment of betrayal and shame became a moment of gift and grace, the present challenges we face also can be ones of rejuvenation and joy. They can lead us to become a church where it is clear that Jesus came to call sinners, not the righteous; they can help us be a community which finds a place at the table for those who have been excluded by virtue of race, ethnicity, and marital or immigration status. They can bring to birth a church that is less clerical and secretive, and enable us to be a more transparent church in which the laity are recognized and empowered to exercise their full dignity as baptized Christians. They could mark the end of a church functioning as sort of a multinational business, operating through a distant and unaccountable bureaucracy, and can lead us to become more evidently a community of disciples.

I pray, then, that as bishops we will seek to embrace these qualities I have cited and continue to say yes to the call we have received to be beacons of light, anchors of hope, vessels of charity and instruments of peace and justice in a church, world and society which so desperately needs such.

May it be so!