

ADDRESS BY HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
TO WALK WITH THE POOR IS TO WALK WITH GOD
CATHOLIC CHARITIES BROOKLYN & QUEENS – 125TH ANNIVERSARY SYMPOSIUM
ST. JOHN’S UNIVERSITY – QUEENS, NEW YORK
NOVEMBER 16, 2024

Distinguished guests; esteemed members of Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens; friends and partners; dear brothers and sisters:

I am grateful to be here today. In particular, I thank Bishop Brennan and Msgr. LoPinto for the invitation to join this weekend’s celebration of a great milestone for this local Church: 125 years of compassionate, Christ-centered service on the part of Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens.

I appreciate this opportunity to speak of how the work of Catholic Charities carries out the vision for the evangelization of today’s world which Pope Francis has articulated from the beginning of his pontificate, more than 11 years ago. As you know, the first Apostolic Exhortation which the Holy Father issued, in 2013, was titled *Evangelii Gaudium*, “the joy of the Gospel”. It was an expression of his vision for evangelizing the people of today’s world, based on the recognition that we are living, not just in changing times, but in a “change of time”, in which the faith is not being transmitted as “automatically” as it once was from one generation to the next. And because of this, our approach to evangelization needs to adapt to the new situation.

One of the expressions that Pope Francis has used to describe how the transmission of Christ’s love needs to spread today is the image of the “field hospital”. That is the reality in which we so often find ourselves in the contemporary situation. You who work directly in providing charitable services to the poor and suffering know this. It is like we have set up a medical tent in the midst of a battlefield, and we must apply saving remedies to people who are in grave situations. In our case, the life-saving remedy is the communication of the love of Christ to people whose lives are filled with brokenness: not only material poverty, but spiritual and moral as well. As the Pope says, in a field hospital, the medics aren’t worried about people’s cholesterol levels; they need to heal wounds. So too, we who work at imparting the message of Christ’s love need to offer the most basic message, namely: that Christ loves the person we are encountering, is eager to be close to them, and wants to call them “friend”. There may

be any number of further steps that a person will need to take on their pathway of discipleship; but to begin with, they need to know Christ's saving love exactly where we find them.

One of the good things about the work that you do with Catholic Charities, is that you are always encountering people in immediate need of God's saving love. It is often very concrete. People are hungry and thirsty; they need food. People are homeless; they need shelter. People are imprisoned; they need someone to visit them. Each day you come face-to-face with what Jesus said, and what Pope Francis repeated in his Message for the Fifth World Day of the Poor: "The poor you will always have with you."¹

This reality – that there are always poor people among us – reveals the injustice of this world; but it also provides a daily opportunity for us to encounter the face of Jesus Christ, precisely in those who are poor. For as Jesus said, "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."² To love and serve the poor is to love and serve God. To walk with the poor is to walk with God.

At the outset of this talk, then, I want to encourage you who are involved with Catholic Charities: while your work is difficult, and while at times it might seem like, in spite of all your efforts, there is still so much more that you can't do, every act of accompaniment and love that you perform is of great value to the Lord. Each person is of infinite dignity and value.

In order to offer some practical reminders of the value of the work of Catholic Charities, I would like now to show some of the ways in which this mission aligns with the universal mission of the Church, and in particular with the pastoral vision that the Holy Father has been giving us in his teachings. After saying something briefly about the meaning of charity which is the heart of our Gospel mission, I will connect the mission of Catholic Charities with synodality, with the Pope's recent teaching on the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and with the upcoming Jubilee Year of Hope.

I. The Meaning of Charity: The Heart of Our Gospel Mission

¹ *Mark* 14:7; Cf. Pope Francis, Message for the Fifth World Day of the Poor (14 November 2021), 13 June 2021.

² *Matthew* 25:40.

To begin with, let's remember what charity really means. This morning, we looked at poverty as a “multidimensional problem”, and this afternoon we are proposing charity as the “multidimensional solution” to this problem. And this is true. Charity is always the answer to poverty. Poverty exists because justice has been denied. And as Christians, we can't simply wait for justice to be restored. We must work to demand that leaders and the economically privileged enact just measures that will alleviate the afflictions of those who are left on the “short end” of social progress. But in the meantime, we must apply something that is greater than justice: mercy and charity. And yes, we must do this in multiple “dimensions”. The Church and her mission of mercy, which is nothing other than the Lord's continuing mission on earth, must be everywhere – in every sector of society, in all places.

But as much of a “solution” as charity is to the problem of poverty, charity itself, we must recall, is more fundamental than a solution. Before any problems or poverty had entered the human experience on account of original sin, charity dwelt with our first parents as the gift of God – as a free relationship that he had with them. Even prior to that, it was charity – God's own love – which created the world and set human beings at the center of creation. Love is the origin of our being, the “stuff” of which we are made, the deepest longing of every human heart, and the destiny of us all. As St. Bernard of Clairvaux preached: “Love is sufficient of itself, it gives pleasure by itself and because of itself. It is its own merit, its own reward. Love looks for no cause outside itself, no effect beyond itself. Its profit lies in its practice. I love because I love, I love that I may love.”³ And as St. John expressed: “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.”⁴

Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens is grounded in charity, for the reason that every human being is made from love and for love. As Christians, we affirm this reality. And by the grace of God and the promises of our Baptism, we have pledged to live this reality with the whole of our being: to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.⁵

II. Synodality and Charity Toward the Poor

³ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 83 on the *Song of Songs*.

⁴ *1 John* 4:16.

⁵ Cf. *Mark* 12:30-31.

How, then, is our charity toward the poor – such as the work you do as part of Catholic Charities in this Diocese – a “synodal” work? After all, the Pope has called us to recognize, in a deeper way, how being a synodal Church is part of our identity as God’s Church. As a reminder for anyone who still may struggle to understand synodality: to be a “synod” is to be a people who are walking together, welcoming the participation of everyone who wants to be part of the community of the Lord’s disciples. It means journeying together, with each other and with the Lord, on the pathway to that full and final encounter with Christ that we all long for. Along this shared journey, there is a requirement of attentive listening to each other and to the Spirit; for patient discernment; and for a dialogue that sets aside individualistic agendas and narrow ideologies in favor of a communal commitment to the Lord’s own work.

Synodality requires that we serve and live our Catholic faith not from a distance, but in and among those we seek to serve. It means acting in communion with one another, and not only in communion with those who are working “for the Church”, but in communion with those whom we serve. Upon being elected Pope in 2013, Francis was convinced that we needed to be “a Church which is poor and for the poor”.⁶ This means that we need to come into such communion with the poor that they, along with ourselves, become protagonists in the mission, and not just “recipients” of other people’s charity. The voices and experiences of the poor should actually shape our mission.⁷

As Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens examines its mission -- looking at what is working well for evangelization, and what structures and habits could use re-shaping, a good question to ask is this: *To what degree are the people whom we serve also the protagonists of the mission?*

It would also be good for us to look at what the recently concluded Second General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality has said regarding the Church’s service of the poor. Here is what was stated in the final document of the Synod:

“‘God’s heart has a special place for the poor’, the marginalized and the excluded. Therefore, they are at the heart of the Church. The whole Christian community is called to recognize in those made poor the face and flesh of Christ, who, though He was rich, became poor for us, so that we might become rich through His poverty. The preferential option for the

⁶ Pope Francis, Address to Representatives of the Communications Media, 16 March 2013.

⁷ Cf. Pope Francis, Greetings to Managing Directors and Employees of Major Companies and Banks, 15 June 2024.

poor is implicit in Christological faith. The direct knowledge of the suffering Christ possessed by the poor makes them heralds of a salvation received as a gift, and witnesses to the joy of the Gospel. The Church is called to be poor with those who are poor, who often constitute the majority of the faithful, to listen to them, learning together how to recognize the charisms they receive from the Spirit. The Church also needs to learn to recognize them as agents of evangelization.”⁸

Did you hear that? “Heralds of the Gospel”. “The charisms they receive from the Spirit”. “Agents of evangelization”. This is it! We must “un-learn” our tendency to treat the poor as merely “objects” of our charity, to whom we give things and then move on. We can find ourselves thinking that we are helping the poor, but never including them. But when a community of the Lord’s disciples learns to go beyond giving “hand-outs”, and actually invites the poor into relationship with themselves, we discover the truth that we are all the same! We are all poor! We are all “beggars” before the infinite riches of God, who himself became poor by becoming one of us in order to enter into relationship with us.

Every time that Catholic Charities not only meets people’s material needs, but also enters into their stories, and becomes friends with them, this is the Gospel of Christ. You can tell that you are living as Christ lived when you discover that you are not merely the ones giving, but you are receiving from the ones whom you came to serve. There is when we experience the equality of our human dignity. This is how we remove from the poor a “stigma” that we have placed on them. It is especially wonderful when we realize that people who are materially poor are able to offer significant spiritual gifts. We discover that those whom we began by considering “poor”, are really no more poor than we are before God; and that they are also “rich” in ways that we can admire and delight in.

In short, a synodal Church is a Church that listens to and learns from people who are poor. We have much to learn from such people!

Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens will reflect this vision of synodality every time that it embraces the poor as co-laborers in the mission of mercy and justice. Those in need are not “outsiders” to be helped, but members of the family of God. It is essential to see the poor as agents of evangelization, whose deep trust in God often reveals the purest faith. Synodality thus compels us not only to serve but to be

⁸ “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission”, Final Document of XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 26 October 2024, 19.

evangelized by the poor, who reflect Christ in their suffering, resilience, and unwavering hope.

III. *Dilexit Nos*: Love Rooted in the Heart of Christ

Having spoken of the work of Catholic Charities in terms of synodality, I would now like to root this mission in the rich spiritual teaching that Pope Francis has recently given us in his encyclical letter about the Sacred Heart of Jesus, titled *Dilexit nos*, which means: “He loved us.”⁹

This encyclical is valuable, especially for those of who are actively engaged in the outward mission to which the Lord calls us as member of his Church. The more that we go “outward” and engage in active works of charity, the more essential it is that we go deeply “inward”, fostering a genuine interior life. Otherwise, it is easy for us to drift from a well-motivated program of active charity into a kind of “activism” that loses its mooring, if we do not maintain a daily life of prayer. I am not critiquing activism as such, since the Church does need people who are working hard to advance the Gospel in society, especially when it is opposed by unjust social structures. But our Christian activity would lose its “soul” if it were to forget the personal encounter with Christ that inspires it and gives it meaning. We are all familiar with Jesus’ gentle rebuke of Martha when she lost herself in service and forgot the presence of the One whom she served, and his defense of Martha’s sister Mary for remembering the “one thing necessary”.¹⁰ As friends of Jesus and his missionary disciples, we can never become detached from the one thing that makes our service different from secular social services: our service flows from the heart of Christ. And so, if our work is to be truly Catholic, then it must always come from our union with Christ.

This is what I think the Pope’s encyclical on the Sacred Heart can help us with. To begin with, he reminds us from the outset of the document that it was God who loved us first. Again, returning to what I said earlier about charity: God’s love came before there was any need. His love existed within himself, so much so that St. John was able to say that “God *is* love”; and from that infinite wellspring of love came his loving work of creation, at the crown of which is you and me, the creatures made in his image and likeness. God loved us – and he made us capable of receiving love – before we were

⁹ Cf. *Romans* 8:37; Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos* on the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ, 24 October 2024.

¹⁰ Cf. *Luke* 10 :38-42.

ever called to enact love ourselves, and before we even had the ability to love. For this reason, the most essential thing for us who want to be missionaries of God's charity, is that we return each day to the source of that charity: God himself.

And the "place" where generations of Christians have contacted God's love in a personal and human way, is the heart of Christ. Christians have experienced, by meditating on that Sacred Heart of Jesus, the combination of human and divine love that expresses the mystery of the God who became man. We feel the beating heart of Christ, we come to know that it beats for us, and we discover: "Here is one who loves me in a human way – with a human heart!... This is like the heart of my mother which I felt in her womb!... This is like the heart of my father which I heard when I rested on his chest as a child!" And then, we come to realize that this very *human* experience of love, coming from the heart of Christ, is therefore an experience of *divine* love, since in the person of Christ, humanity and divinity are united.

What does this mean for our active works of charity? It means that when we go out to love others – the poor, those in distress – we will be doing so not in blind obedience to a commandment, much less in order to issue a doctrine or proselytize; but because we have had an experience of God's love that we wish to share. As St. Paul says, "The love of Christ *impels* us..."¹¹ We are "impelled", from within, to share something that is too good to keep to ourselves. We want others to be able to have the same kind of experience that we have had: a real encounter with the God who loves us like a mother, a father... and even with a love of passion and desire, like the love of a bridegroom for his bride. And indeed, as a friend as well. This is what our daily return to Christ in prayer gives to us. It gives us – and no one else can give it to us – the very love that our missionary discipleship is meant to convey. Without our own experience of the human and divine love for us in the heart of God, we will have nothing genuine to share. We can still "do good" to people and give them things that may help them. But if we are not sharing with them – at least implicitly – the love of Christ, then our service is not uniquely Christian or Catholic.

In his letter on the heart of Christ, the Pope summarizes this dynamic by saying that there are two essential aspects that contemporary devotion needs to combine: *first*, personal spiritual experience; and *second*, communal missionary commitment.¹² Neither of these aspects can stand alone. If we have only a personal spiritual experience

¹¹ 2 *Corinthians* 5:14.

¹² Cf. *Dilexit Nos*, 91.

but do not engage in a communal mission alongside other disciples who are different from us – remaining instead “in our own world” – then our personal encounter with the Lord will do little to evangelize others. On the other hand, if we engage in the communal mission but neglect our own personal encounter with Christ, we will lose what “fuels” our mission. In addition to providing the fuel for our mission, our personal encounter is also important because it gives us a story to tell that is often the most powerful evangelical witness we offer. There are times when someone whom we are serving will be impressed by the energy that motivates us. They will notice the joy that we exude, and will want to know: “What makes you offer yourself in this way?” And then, we can share with them the particular ways in which God has entered our lives and attracted us follow him. When people hear these stories, they come to believe that God can touch their lives too! Just look at Saint Paul: his own personal encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus was always at the heart of the Gospel he preached.¹³

Another very valuable insight that Pope Francis gives us in his letter on the Sacred Heart has to do with the power of reparation. As I have alluded previously in this talk, we are living in a world that is awash with injustice, neglect of those most in need, radical inequality, and to use the Holy Father’s term, a “culture of indifference”. In the midst of this reality, discouragement is a real temptation for those of us who seek to carry forth the Gospel. Sometimes we might think: What difference are we making? But in response to this sort of question, and to a temptation to discouragement, the Pope speaks of the spirituality of “reparation” from a fresh perspective. By “reparation”, he does not mean a kind of self-flagellating, “woe-to-us” mentality which is focused on evil, guilt, and shame. Rather, he proposes a more positive way of approaching reparation, which leads to hope and joy in the midst of the insurmountable debt that humanity carries before God. This way of looking at reparation involves remembering how “thirsty” the heart of Christ is for love. Yes, for *our* love. For human love. The heart of Christ thirsts for love from the very people who have crucified him with their indifference, their neglect of him and his poor ones, their selfishness and materialism. We have nailed Christ to the Cross by our sins; but he still is asking for us to quench his thirst for love. He leaves himself completely helpless, and only able to be satisfied by our acts of love: to him, and especially, to his “least ones” who are living among us.

Reparation, then, means that we allow ourselves to be overcome by his mercy in the midst of his misery, and to accept the astonishing truth that he is still desiring – thirsting for – our love. We, who have broken and bruised humanity’s relationship with

¹³ Cf. *Acts* 22:3-21; 26:8-23.

God, can immediately choose to repair what has been broken. We can even, in a real sense – as astounding as this is – help heal the heart of Christ. And the more evil that his heart suffers on account of the state of the world, the more the Lord turns to us to satisfy his thirst for love. We find ourselves in an amazingly privileged place, because we are the people on whom God can trust for his work of redemption.

IV. The Coming Jubilee Year 2025: A Hope That Does Not Disappoint

Having connected the work of Catholic Charities with both synodality and the Pope’s encyclical on the heart of Christ, I would like, lastly, to allow the coming Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025 to inspire us in gratitude for what has already been accomplished in the work of Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens, as well as bring us a sense of renewal.

On Christmas Eve, the first of the four Holy Doors at the major basilicas in Rome will be opened: that of St. Peter’s Basilica. The theme of this Holy Year is the “hope that does not disappoint”.¹⁴ There is only one hope that does not disappoint, by the way: the hope of Christ and his promise to renew all things. For 125 years, Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens has been led by this hope and has instilled this hope in the people and the communities it has served. This is still your mission. Hope is a wonderful and resilient thing, because it is precisely the virtue that endures when all seems lost. It is the proclamation that says: Christ is risen, and he will never die again! And because of this, all who believe in him and persevere in his love will be saved. Hope is something that doesn’t flinch from suffering, because the exercise of hope actually *presumes* suffering. We recall that Jesus included suffering among the things that he promised to his disciples. The difference is that, according to the Lord’s own words, suffering would be far outweighed by blessings, even in this life, and it would be eternally transformed by the life to come.¹⁵

This is the proclamation that we are to be a part of during this coming Jubilee Year. And we can be sure that our proclamation – that *your* proclamation, in your work of love in the community – will be powerfully aided by actual graces that God gives through his Church during the year. A jubilee is in fact a year of grace. It is a year when we can expect to experience deliverance and greater freedom, provided that we ourselves choose to set others free, such as through forgiveness. Many people whom

¹⁴ *Romans 5:5; Spes Non Confundit*, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, 9 May 2024.

¹⁵ Cf. *Mark 10:29-30*.

we encounter in our charitable services are captive in some way. Even if we are able to free them somewhat from captivity to material poverty, there still may be a spiritual bondage that afflicts them, or an addiction, or an attachment to a wish or a longing which cannot be fulfilled, and which they must surrender if they are to be free to hope in the one promise that is sure to be fulfilled: that of the friendship of Christ and the gift of his peace. Be sure that during this Jubilee, God is prepared to give you the spiritual gifts that you will need to be instruments of people's freedom – even as you experience more freedom yourselves. It will be a realization of what Jesus prophesied when he said: “I came so that they may have life and have it more abundantly.”¹⁶

And so, I encourage you to embrace this Jubilee and to open yourselves to the graces that will be made available to us during its celebration.

Conclusion

Thank you again for this opportunity to share with you the ways in which the universal proclamation in the Church, especially as articulated by Pope Francis, is being echoed by the service of Catholic Charities in this Diocese, just as its service for the last 125 years has incarnated Christ's mission in every generation in which it has been active.

On behalf of Pope Francis, I commend each and every one of you, and your community as a whole, for your commitment to Christ, whose Vicar he is, and to the Church's mission of evangelization.

I pray that you will continue to grow in the “comforting joy of evangelizing”¹⁷ that we find when we walk together; that your communion with Christ will go to even greater depths as you encounter the love of his Sacred Heart; and that the coming Jubilee will be a time of surpassing mercy and growing freedom for you, your families, and those you serve in the name of Christ.

Thank you, and may God bless you all.

¹⁶ *John* 10:10.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, 24 November 2013, 10.