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MESSAGE FROM BISHOP ROBERT MCELROY OF THE DIOCESE OF SAN DIEGO TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE US REGIONAL MEETING OF POPULAR MOVEMENTS

For the past century, from the worker movements of Catholic action in France, Belgium and Italy to Pope John XXXIII's call to re-structure the economies of the world in "Mater et Magistra," to the piercing missionary message of the Latin American Church, the words "see," "judge" and "act" have provided a powerful pathway for those who seek to renew the temporal order, in the light of the Gospel and justice.

As the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace described this pathway, it lies in "seeing clearly the situation, judging with principles that foster the integral development of people and acting in a way which implements these principles in the light of everyone's unique situation."

There is no greater charter for this gathering taking place here in Modesto in these days than the simple but rich architecture of these three words: "see," "judge" and "act." Yet these words -- which carry with them such a powerful history of social transformation around the world in service to the dignity of the human person -- must be renewed and re-examined at every age and seen against the background of those social, economic and political forces in each historical moment.

In the United States we stand at a pivotal moment as a people and a nation, in which bitter divisions cleave our country and pollute our national dialogue.

In our reflections in these days, here, we must identify the ways in which our very ability to see, judge and act on behalf of justice is being endangered by cultural currents which leave us isolated, embittered and angry. We must make the issues of jobs, housing, immigration, economic disparities and the environment, foundations for common efforts rather than of division. We must see prophetic words and prophetic actions which produce unity and cohesion

and we must do so in the spirit of hope which is realistic. For as Pope Francis stated to the meeting in Bolivia: “You are sowers of change,” and sowers never lose hope.

First, “see clearly the situation.” One of the most striking elements of “Laudato Si” is his clear and bold analysis of the empirical realities that threaten the Earth which is our common home. “Seeing the situation clearly” is the whole foundation for that encyclical. It is the starting point for transformative justice. Pope Francis was unafraid to venture into this controversial set of questions about climate change and the environment despite the fact that massive social and economic forces, especially within our own country, have conspired to obscure the scientific realities of climate change and environmental degradation, in the very same way that the tobacco companies obscured for decades the medical science pertaining to smoking.

There is a lesson for us here, as agents of change and justice. Never be afraid to speak the truth. Always find your foundation for reflection and action in the fullness of empirical reality. Design strategies for change upon ever fuller dissemination of truths, even when they seem inconvenient to the cause.

This is an especially important anchor for us, in an age in which truth itself is under attack.

Pope Benedict lamented the diminishment of attention to the importance of objective truth in public life and discourse. Now we come to a time when alternate facts compete with real facts, and whole industries have arisen to shape public opinion in destructively isolated and dishonest patterns. The dictum “see clearly the situation” has seldom been more difficult in our society in the United States.

Yet the very realities which our speakers this morning have all pointed to in capturing the depth of marginalization in housing, work and economic equality within the United States point us toward the clarification and the humanization of truth, which leads to a deeper grasp of the realities of injustice and marginalization that confront our nation.

As Pope Francis underscored in his words to the Popular Movements in Bolivia, “When we look into the eyes of the suffering, when they see the faces of the endangered *campesino*, the poor laborer, the downtrodden native, the homeless family, the persecuted migrant, the unemployed young person and the exploited child, we have seen and heard not a cold statistic but the pain of a suffering humanity, our own pain, our own flesh.”

One of the most important elements of your work as agents of justice in our midst in this country in this day in this moment, is to help our society as a whole become more attuned to this reality of humanized truth, through narrative and witness, listening and solidarity. In this way, you not only witness to the truth through the lives and experiences of the marginalized, you help us all to see the most powerful realities of our world in greater depth.

Those realities embrace both scientific findings and stories of tragedy, economic analysis and the tears of the human heart. “See clearly the situation” is not merely a step in your work on behalf of justice, it shapes everything that you do to transform our world.

Secondly, “judging with principles to foster integral development.” The fundamental political question of our age is whether our economic structures and systems in the United States will enjoy ever greater freedom or whether they will be located effectively within a juridical structure which seeks to safeguard the dignity of the human person and the common good of our nation.

In that battle, the tradition of Catholic social teaching is unequivocally on the side of strong governmental and societal protections for the powerless, the worker, the homeless, the hungry, those without decent medical care, the unemployed. This stance of the Church’s teaching flows from the teaching of the Book of Genesis: The creation is the gift of God to all of humanity. Thus in the most fundamental way, there is a universal destination for all of the material goods that exist in this world. Wealth is a common heritage, not at its core a right of lineage or acquisition.

For this reason, free markets do not constitute a first principle of economic justice. Their moral worth is instrumental in nature and must be structured by government to accomplish the common good.

In Catholic teaching, the very rights which are being denied in our society to large numbers of those who live in our nation are intrinsic human rights in Catholic teaching: The right to medical care; to decent housing; to the protection of human life, from conception to natural death; of the right to food; of the right to work. Catholic teaching sees these rights not merely as points for negotiation, provided only if there is excess in society after the workings of the free market system accomplished their distribution of the nation’s wealth. Rather, these rights are basic claims which every man, woman and family has upon our nation as a whole.

These are the fundamental principles which the Church points to as the basis for judgement for every political and social program that structures economic life within the United States. And they are supplemented in Catholic teaching by a grave suspicion about enormous levels of economic inequality in society. Pope Francis made clear the depth of this suspicion two years ago. “Inequality,” he said, “is the root of social evil.”

In his encyclical “The Joy of the Gospel,” Francis unmasked inequality as the foundation for a process of exclusion that cuts immense segments of society off from meaningful participation in social, political and economic life, as we have all heard this morning. It gives rise to a financial system that rules rather than serves humanity and a capitalism that literally kills those who have no utility as consumers.

Now, when I quote the Pope that “this economy kills,” people very often say to me, “Oh come on, that’s just an exaggeration; it’s a form of speech.”

I want to do an experiment with you. I want you to sit back in your chair for a moment. And close your eyes, and I want you to think of someone you have known that our economy has killed: A senior who can’t afford medicine or rent; a mother or father who is dying, working two and three jobs, really dying because even then they can’t provide for their kids; young people who can’t find their way in the world in which there is no job for them, and they turn to drugs, and gangs and suicide. Think of one person you know that this economy has killed.

Now mourn them.

And now call out their name; let all the world know that this economy kills.

For Catholic social teaching, the surest pathway to economic justice is the provision of meaningful and sustainable work for all men and women capable of work. The “Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church” states, “Economic and social imbalances in the world of work must be addressed by restoring a just hierarchy of values and placing the dignity of workers before all else.”

In work, the Church proclaims, men and women find not only the most sustainable avenue to economic security but also become co-creators with God in the world in which we live. Work is thus profoundly a sacred reality. It protects human dignity even as it spiritually enriches that dignity. If we truly are in our work co-creators with God, don’t we think that deserves at least \$15 an hour?

Number three: Acting. After the panel yesterday, when the panelists were asked in one word how they would summarize their message, I tried to think, what is the “act” that summarizes how we must act in this moment?

And I came up with two words. The first, sadly, has been provided by our past election. President Trump was the candidate of “disruption.” He was “the disruptor,” he said.

Well now, we must all become disruptors. We must disrupt those who would seek to send troops into our streets to deport the undocumented, to rip mothers and fathers from their families. We must disrupt those who portray refugees as enemies rather than our brothers and sisters in terrible need. We must disrupt those who train us to see Muslim men, women and children as forces of fear rather than as children of God. We must disrupt those who seek to rob our medical care, especially from the poor. We must disrupt those who would take even food stamps and nutrition assistance from the mouths of children.

But we, as people of faith, as disciples of Jesus Christ, as children of Abraham, as followers of the Prophet Muhammad, of people of all faiths and no faith, we cannot merely be disruptors, we also have to be rebuilders.

We have to rebuild this nation so that we place at its heart the service to the dignity of the human person and assert what that flag behind us asserts is our heritage: Every man, woman and child is equal in this nation and called to be equal.

We must rebuild a nation in solidarity, what Catholic teaching calls the sense that all of us are the children of the one God, there are no children of a lesser god in our midst. That all of us are called to be cohesive and embrace one another and see ourselves as graced by God. We are called to rebuild our nation which does pay \$15 an hour in wages, and provides decent housing, clothing and food for those who are poorest. And we need to rebuild our Earth, which is so much in danger by our own industries.

So let us see and judge and act.

Let us disrupt and rebuild.

And let us do God's work.

(Remarks delivered at the U.S. Regional World Meeting of Popular Movements during a panel discussion on the barriers marginalized people face in housing and work on February 18, 2017.)