

Message from Modesto

Grassroots popular movement leaders from across the United States, along with our brothers and sisters from 12 countries met for the First U.S. Regional Meeting of Popular Movements in Modesto California, February 16-19, 2017. Two-dozen U.S. Catholic Bishops, Cardinal Peter Turkson, staff from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and Vatican department for the Promotion of Integral Human Development joined us during our meeting.

We live every day the reality that Pope Francis describes when he says that our families and communities are being assaulted by a “system that causes enormous suffering to the human family, simultaneously assaulting people’s dignity and our Common Home in order to sustain the invisible tyranny of money that only guarantees the privileges of a few.” With the Pope we recognize that we are at a “historic turning-point” and that resolution of “this worsening crisis” depends on the participation and action of popular movements.

In this spirit, we transmit the following urgent message to popular movement members, and leaders in the United States and globally, and to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Pope Francis.

We believe that every human is sacred with equal claim to safe water, education, health care, housing and family-sustaining jobs. All people are protagonists of their future. We each have a right to be included in the decisions that shape our lives. Our faith leaders and congregations are called to stand with those whose backs are against the wall. We will be remembered not just by the empathy we express but by the actions we take. Our economy is meant to be in service of people not profit. Racism and all forms of human hierarchy, whether based on skin color, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, arrest and conviction records, immigration status, religion or ethnicity are immoral.

We experience the pain inflicted on people by racial discrimination and economic oppression. The lack of good jobs, affordable housing and clean water and air is literally killing people. Racism is stripping Black, Latino, Asian, Muslim, Native people of their humanity and fueling police abuse and mass-incarceration, and fueling a crisis of homelessness and displacement. Raids and Trump Administration Executive Orders are scapegoating immigrants and ripping families apart.

We understand that a small elite is growing wealthy and powerful off the suffering of our families. Racism and White Supremacy are America’s original sins. They continue to justify a system of unregulated capitalism that idolizes wealth accumulation over human needs. Yet too often our faith communities and religious leaders fail to heed the mandate to denounce greed and stand with the poor and vulnerable. The issues we are facing are intertwined and require all of our voices and actions.

As Pope Francis told us: “The system’s gangrene cannot be whitewashed forever because sooner or later the stench becomes too strong; and when it can no longer be denied, the same power that spawned this state of affairs sets about manipulating fear, insecurity, quarrels, and even people’s justified indignation, in order to shift the responsibility for all these ills onto a “non-neighbor.”

We propose the following actions:

1. Sanctuary

We urge every faith community, including every Catholic parish, to declare themselves a sanctuary for people facing deportation and those being targeted based on religion, race or political beliefs. Being a sanctuary can include hosting families at-risk of deportation, accompanying people to ICE check-ins, organizing to free people from detention, holding Defend Your Rights trainings and organizing rapid response teams. All cities, counties and states should adopt policies that get ICE out of our schools, courts and jails, stop handing over people to ICE and end practices that criminalize people of color through aggressive policing and over-incarceration.

As Pope Francis has said to us: “Who is this innkeeper? It is the Church, the Christian community, people of compassion and solidarity, social organizations. It is us, it is you, to whom the Lord Jesus daily entrusts those who are afflicted in body and spirit, so that we can continue pouring out all of his immeasurable mercy and salvation upon them.”

2. Disrupting oppression and dehumanization

We must put our bodies, money and institutional power at risk to protect our families and communities, using tools that include boycotts, strikes, and non-violent civil disobedience.

As Bishop Robert McElroy said to us, “We must disrupt those who would seek to send troops into our communities to deport the undocumented, to destroy our families. We must disrupt those who portray refugees as enemies. We must disrupt those who train us to see Muslim men & women as a source of threat rather than children of God. We must disrupt those who would take away healthcare, who would take food from our children.”

3. Bold prophetic leadership from faith communities

At this moment of fear and anxiety, we urge our clergy and faith communities to speak and act boldly in solidarity with our people. As Cardinal Tobin shared with us, sometimes our faith leaders need to walk out in front and show that they are not afraid either. We ask our Catholic Bishops to write a covenant that spells out specific actions that dioceses and parishes should take to protect families in the areas of immigration, racism, jobs, housing, and the environment.

4. One People, One Fight

We commit to break down the walls that divide our struggles. We will not let corporate and political elites pit us against each other. We are in one fight to rebuild a society in which every person is seen as fully human, has a full voice in the decisions that shape their lives and is able to thrive and reach their human potential.

5. International Week of Action May 1-7, 2017

We are calling on people in the U.S. and across the globe to stand together against hatred and attacks on families during a week of action May 1-7, 2017.

6. State and regional meetings of popular movements

We propose meetings of popular movements in each of our states over the next six months to bring this statement, the vision of the World Meetings and the Pope's message of hope and courage to every community in the United States.

7. Popular education

We propose to develop a shared curriculum and popular education program to equip people with analysis and tools to transform the world. We will focus on the development and leadership of young people. We will draw on the wisdom of our faith and cultural traditions, including Catholic Social Teaching. We recognize that our spiritual and political selves are inseparable. We have a moral obligation to confront and disrupt injustice.

8. Political power

To defend our families and protect our values we must build political power. We must change the electorate to reflect our communities, through massive efforts to reach out to tens of millions of voters who are ignored and taken for granted by candidates and parties. We must hold elected officials accountable to the common good and encourage people in our communities to take leadership themselves, including running for office, so that we can govern the communities in which we live.

Modesto, California
February 19, 2017