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By addressing recent tragic events, the homily can help the assembly unite with those who are grieving and afflicted.

Praying the Liturgy in the Face of Violence

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On the fiftieth anniversary of the World Day of Peace, Pope Francis issued an invitation for peacebuilding through active nonviolence. He reflected on nonviolence “as a style of politics for peace.”¹ Recalling the Sermon on the Mount, the pope noted that the Beatitudes show the way to live peacefully and asked leaders to apply the Beatitudes to their decision making. To all, he requested a renewed effort to work creatively for nonviolence. He states,

May we dedicate ourselves prayerfully and actively to banishing violence from our hearts, words and deeds, and to becoming nonviolent people and to building nonviolent communities that care for our common home. “Nothing is impossible if we turn to God in prayer. Everyone can be an artisan of peace.”²

That message in 2017 hearkens to the call of the bishops in the United States in their pastoral message *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action*. In that 1994

document, the bishops plea “Our families are torn by violence. Our communities are destroyed by violence. Our faith is tested by violence. We have an obligation to respond. Violence—in our homes, our schools and streets, our nation and world—is destroying the lives, dignity and hopes of millions of our sisters and brothers. Fear of violence is paralyzing and polarizing our communities.”³

The pope’s invitation more than a year ago and the call of many religious leaders today resonates with what the bishops wrote nearly twenty-five years ago in their pastoral message *Confronting a Culture of Violence*. There, the bishops state, “The Catholic community has much at stake and much to contribute. What we believe, where we are, and how we live out our faith can make a great difference in the struggle against violence. We see the loss of lives. We serve the victims. We feel the fear. We must confront this growing culture of violence with a commitment to life, a vision of hope and a call to action.”⁴

Bishops continue to call Catholics to act in the face of this epidemic of violence that has infected the fabric of society. Within the call can be heard reason to hold up in our worship the reality of violence in our world and community, for “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fount from which all the Church’s power flows.”⁵

UNITING WITH OTHERS’ GRIEFS AND ANXIETIES

Catholics cannot stand silent as people mourn their loved ones. As *Gaudium et spes* states, “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.”⁶ *Gaudium et spes* places the afflicted at the center of the concerns of the Church. Our brothers and sisters who suffer from violence, then, should be recognized and held up in prayer during the liturgy. While presiding at Easter Sunday Mass in a parish, Cardinal Blase J. Cupich did just that when he blessed families impacted by violence. “We stand together as a community of faith to support our brothers and sisters here today who have been affected by senseless violence,” he said.⁷ Since the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life,”⁸ it is precisely from this moment that our response to the concerns of the world should stem.

When speaking about the plague of violence, Cupich has said that “just because we can’t do everything doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do something.” He has called the local church to look for ways not only in the Church, but also within the neighborhoods of the archdiocese, to speak and live the message of peace. “Peace” was the first word Christ said to his disciples after the Resurrection.⁹ Prayer needs to be that “something” that is a starting point to a response to violence.

When we gather for the celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday, we do so in a community that is often familiar. The place, the people, the pew in which we sit are known. The reality of our world can be part of that familiar prayer. As part of the Universal Church, we stand with our brothers and sisters in need. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthian community, “If [one] part



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The faithful need to take the words of the dismissal literally: “Go in peace.”

suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.”¹⁰ The reality of our suffering sisters and brothers needs to be brought into our parishes, and the peace received in the Eucharist needs to be brought to our neighborhoods and world. Parishes need to help their communities grasp that the Dismissal Rite sends us forth to be peace builders in the community, for the Eucharist sends us forth with the gift of peace to be shared.

Fr. Matt O’Donnell, the pastor of the parish where the cardinal blessed victims of violence, ministers weekly to grieving families. He arrives at the scene of a crime in his neighborhood seeking to bring Christ to the situation. “We have to take the dismissal of the liturgy literally,” he told me, “if Jesus was here today, he would be at the yellow crime scene tape to be present. That’s the place the Church needs to be, for she precisely calls us to live the words of the dismissal of ‘go in peace.’” At O’Donnell’s parish, the epidemic of violence is always remembered within the liturgy, beginning with the joyful greeting from the commentator before Mass begins. Simple gestures assist the community to show respect and love to one another and helps them get to know one another. Through such interactions, the communal nature of the liturgy takes root in hearts and assists the faithful in living out the reality of community in their daily lives.

MOMENTS TO FACE THE REALITY OF VIOLENCE

In the liturgy, the reality of violence can be faced and prayer for peace lifted up. The rubrics during the Introductory Rites state that “the Priest, or a Deacon or another minister, may very briefly introduce the faithful to the Mass of the day.”¹¹ At this

moment, an intention for peace in the midst of violence can be set before the community. The minister may note the victims of violence in the community, nation, or overseas while raising up the intention for peace. Anchoring the prayer of the faithful in such a way can affect the Penitential Act that follows. The presider could guide that moment by saying, “For the times our congregation hasn’t been attentive to the needs of our church outside these walls. For the times we have thought of the problem of violence as a ‘them’ problem and not an ‘us’ problem. For the times we have given in to violence by our indifference. For the times we have been violent in our speech against those who are different from us. We turn now to our God who never tires of forgiving us and ‘acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries.”¹²

In the face of the growing violence in our nation, one can’t help but cry out during the Penitential Act, “Lord, have mercy.” Week after week, we say those words with invocations that precede our call and desire for mercy. Especially appropriate when seeking God’s mercy in the face of violence may be the following invocations in Appendix VI of the Missal:

Lord Jesus, you came to reconcile us to one another
and to the Father.
Lord Jesus, you heal the wounds of sin and division.
Lord Jesus, you intercede for us with your Father.

Often the Sunday readings in the Liturgy of the Word challenge the faithful to live the message and reality of peace in the routines of their lives. (When preparing a Mass or prayer service outside of Sunday that focuses on peace, refer to the readings in “For Peace and Justice” [887–891] in Masses for Various Needs and Occasions in the Lectionary.) The preacher may reflect on the theme of peace that was introduced in the Penitential Act. Especially after an act of violence in the world, nation, or community has affected the congregation, it is important for the homily to address the reality. When preachers do not address the issue in their homily, it can seem as though they are in a scriptural bubble. To overlook a tragic event that took place in the days prior to Sunday Mass is to ignore that the Church is universal. Preaching a message of peace and solidarity from the pulpit is a powerful witness to the call to discipleship. Pope Francis, in his 2016 message for the World Day of Peace, voiced hope that “all of us will learn to ‘forgive and give,’ to become more open ‘to those living on the outermost fringes of society—fringes which modern society itself creates,’ and to refuse to fall into ‘a humiliating indifference.’”¹³ Preachers would do well to take these words to heart, for they recall the words of *Gaudium et spes*. The anxieties and griefs of those who suffer the plague of violence are the anxieties and griefs of every community of faith. Rather than an “us” and “them” situation, there is only us. A call from the pulpit to unite with those who are suffering can lessen that “humiliating indifference.”

Sometimes a desire not to offend may mean that the petitions in the Universal Prayer are indirect. However, if there is a struggle with the issue of violence from guns, an intention can be for an end to all violence, especially gun violence. The community can better grasp its union with the stranger in their



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A hospitable, loving community encourages peaceful living.

midst when an intention is made for the immigrant and refugee. Naming those who have died through violence can be powerful. A parish in the Archdiocese of Chicago lists each week the names of people who have died from acts of violence in Chicago. Could your parish do something similar? One of the most profound elements of the Walk for Peace that Cardinal Cupich led in the archdiocese on Good Friday 2017 was the reading, at each Station of the Cross, of the name, gender, and age of someone who died violently. The crowd heard the name of a person who often becomes a statistic in the eyes of the world. Sacred Scripture is filled with God calling people by name; when we pray, let’s not be afraid to do the same.

The Eucharistic Prayer recalls the passion and death of our Savior. In a certain sense, the celebration of the Last Supper was a peaceful moment before an act of violence—the Crucifixion of our Savior. Therefore, our Eucharist, by its very institution, is a peaceful act. It is the sign of peace amid violence. The Eucharist sends us forth with the gift of peace. A gift is not to be put “under a bushel basket”¹⁴ but to be shared generously with everyone.

The Sign of Peace within the celebration of the Mass provides the specific opportunity to share Christ’s peace. The faithful extend a sign of peace to those around them, greeting one another as honored guests in God’s house. This gesture in which Christ’s peace is extended to another recalls Christ’s greeting his Apostles after the Resurrection. The evangelist John writes that “on the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”¹⁵

PRAYING WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

At times, there is a need for a deliberate and organized moment of prayer in the face of violence. In the Archdiocese of Chicago, such prayer has taken different forms. In 2017 and 2018, civic and religious leaders have joined Cardinal Cupich and hundreds others on Good Friday during the Walk for Peace through neighborhoods that have been wracked with violence. During



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A march can help those who do not know Christ hear the Gospel. It can also be a prophetic moment that demonstrates the power of peace.

these walks, young people and families have shared their struggles and told of the impact violence has had on them. After ten people were shot, three of them fatally, during a week in May 2017, in the neighborhood of Immaculate Conception Church, the pastor, Fr. Manuel Dorantes, celebrated Mass on a week night and then led a procession in the street. Priests and parishioners from three parishes processed to the site of the shootings, where the priests blessed the area and then the homes of neighbors. During the Mass prior to the procession, Dorantes told the assembly that they would pray “that we may have the courage to be sowers of peace” and would pray for the young people who were killed and hospitalized. At another parish, Fr. Michael Pflieger preaches about the need to be peacemakers and also takes to the streets to vocalize the message. “It’s time to change the narrative from being the victim to being the victorious,” Pflieger said as he launched a weekly Friday night march throughout a neighborhood. A banner carried in the march announces that “peace starts here.”

These prophetic moments of witness can inspire other faith communities. Any moment of deliberate prayer for peace affords the opportunity for people to come together to demonstrate the power of peace through prayer in the wake of continued violence. While the starting place should always be prayer, sometimes the message of peace needs to be taken, in a collective way, to the neighborhood. As Pope Francis states in *The Joy of the Gospel*, “Evangelization is first and foremost about preaching the Gospel to those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him.”¹⁶ Continuing, he quotes the Latin

American bishops, saying, “that we ‘cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings.’”¹⁷

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Practically speaking, a community needs to be catechized on the reasons for taking prayer into the streets. This catechesis will take many forms, including preaching about the need to stand peacefully in the face of violence, naming those who have died because of violence, bulletin articles, and social media postings. The amount of time parishes will need for catechesis will differ but whatever time that is required should be taken for the desire for peace to be ingrained into the fabric of the community. Before a procession in the streets, the congregation should realize that they cannot help but preach and witness to the message of peace.

When it is decided to take the liturgy to the streets, notify the police and other civic leaders. Doing so will ensure that the parish is following the procedures and laws of the community and also will allow civic authorities to assist in logistics and planning and provide any needed security. Whether a prayer service or Mass takes place in a scheduled way as a deliberate action in the face of violence or it needs to occur suddenly after a violent act, communication with the faithful is key to attendance. People need to be invited so that the community can come together to pray, mourn, and witness to the place of faith in the face of violence. Since these moments of prayer should gather people, find as many ways as possible to get the word out, including phone trees as well as social media.



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A petition in the Universal Prayer can address the violence that has occurred locally, nationally, or internationally.

Depending on how the community comes together, it may be more appropriate to celebrate a prayer service for peace in lieu of Mass. A prayer service provides for members of other faith traditions to attend, as well as local civic leaders, and neighbors and friends who are not Catholic. As a sign of solidarity, the parish can reach out and invite those who have been plagued by violence or have lost a loved one or friend. In preparing for the event, the parish should seek to provide an environment of hospitality. Ministers of hospitality can provide a welcoming presence and an order of service will assist with prayer.

In preparing a service with the focus on peace, the parish may want to celebrate the Mass “For the Preservation of Peace and Justice” or “For Reconciliation” in Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions in the Missal. Besides the Lectionary readings for “Peace and Justice,” the readings for “Reconciliation” (892–896) might be considered. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has many resources on its website, ranging from petitions and prayers that speak to the message of peace to Scripture passages that can be incorporated into a service. These are available at uscbb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/violence/. Appropriate music may include “O Day of Peace” the “Prayer of St. Francis,” and also hymns and songs that speak to the desire to live in community, such as, “Help Us Accept Each Other” or “Lord of All Nations, Grant Me Grace.”

CONCLUSION

Prayer is the place to begin to respond to violence. Whether that prayer is in a Eucharistic celebration or expressed through a peace walk and prayer service in the streets, prayer provides a place to start. As Cardinal Cupich said, we can do something in the face of violence. What we do first is to bring our hearts to God, who in turn is manifested in us. As the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states,

The liturgy . . . is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church. . . . While the liturgy builds up those who are within into a holy temple of the Lord, into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ, at the same time it marvelously strengthens their power to preach Christ and thus shows forth the Church to those who are outside as a sign lifted up among the nations, under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together, until there is one sheepfold and one shepherd.¹⁸ ♦

Notes

1. Pope Francis, *Message for World Day of Peace* (2017), 1.
2. Pope Francis, *Message for World Day of Peace* (2017), 7.
3. *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action*, 1.
4. *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action*, 3.
5. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 10.
6. *Gaudium et spes*, 1.
7. Leonor Vivanco, “Cardinal Gives Easter Blessing to Families Victimized by Violence,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 16, 2017.
8. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1324, quoting *Lumen gentium*, 11.
9. John 20:19–20.
10. 1 Corinthians 12:26.
11. *The Roman Missal*, Order of Mass, 3.
12. *The Roman Missal*, Order of Mass, 4.
13. Pope Francis, *Message for World Day of Peace* (2016), 2.
14. Matthew 5:15.
15. John 20:19.
16. *The Joy of the Gospel*, 14.
17. *The Joy of the Gospel*, 15.
18. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 2.

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