

Cardinal George pledges bishops' support to social justice ministers

WASHINGTON - Saying that the church's social mission can ease the suffering of the poor and voiceless, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops pledged the full support of the U.S. bishops to the hundreds of people working in social ministry across the country.

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago told more than 500 ministers gathered at a Washington hotel for the Feb. 22 opening Mass of the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering that the bishops desire to work closely with social service providers and peace and justice advocates in a time of extreme hardship.

"Without apology, I tell you that the bishops want to be with you," Cardinal George said during his homily.

"You cannot be yourself and about the social mission of the church without the bishops' presence and their cooperation," the cardinal said. "They pledge that presence and that cooperation, but you have to help us to know how to help you.

"We depend upon you to help the church's social mission take on flesh and meaning. Together we discover again what it means to be in Christ and we discover that we can't be in Christ except together," he said.

Noting that people around the world desire to live in the freedom that Christ promises, Cardinal George urged the social justice ministers to continue being a voice for the world's poorest and most vulnerable people, including the unborn.

"In all of this there are many actors and in all this there are many plans," he

explained. “We hope the best of them will succeed. But in all of this the church and you must be an original voice. The church is never fodder for someone else’s campaign. We can neither be co-opted nor excluded. That is a particularly difficult position.”

The church’s voice is different because it is rooted in Christ’s love for all, he explained.

“This is clearly the mission of the church. This is clearly something you understand because you give your very life to it,” he said.

In an address to the gathering’s first plenary session following the Mass, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, papal nuncio to the United States, offered words of appreciation for the social justice ministers’ work as “witnesses of the love of Jesus and the cause of Jesus.”

“The U.S. has been invaded by the love of the Lord,” he said.

The nuncio, who has served in the Vatican diplomatic corps for nearly 40 years in places such as Cameroon, Israel, Cuba, Algeria, Nicaragua, Belgium, India, Burundi and Indonesia, told the gathering that social ministry holds a central role in the life of the church.

His presentation focused on the four pillars of the church’s social doctrine: the love of Christ for all people, doing justice, loving the poor and healing a broken world. He examined each pillar, explaining how the church’s Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church serves as a tool to inspire and guide the faithful.

Certain segments of society, Archbishop Sambi said, view justice as a right that applies only to some people. But, he explained, human dignity cannot be defined so simply.

“Justice is not merely simple human convention because what is just is not first determined by the law but by the profound nature of the human being,” he said. “By itself justice is not enough. Indeed, it can even betray itself unless it’s open to that deeper power, which is love.”

He also invoked the spirit of Pope Paul VI, who based his calls for justice in the pursuit of peace around the world.

“The way to peace is development. It means to give a chance to the poor to change their life,” he said.

The annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, held Feb. 22-25 this year, is co-sponsored by 18 agencies, including five agencies of the USCCB: the Catholic Campaign for Human Development; the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church; the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development; Migration and Refugee Services; and the Office of Pro-Life Activities.

Other co-sponsors are the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Catholic Charities USA, the Catholic Daughters of the Americas, the Catholic Health Association, Catholic Relief Services, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, JustFaith, the Ladies of Charity, the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the National Council of Catholic Women, the Roundtable Association of Diocesan Social Action Directors and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.