

Ecumenical and Interreligious Service - Homily based on Luke 6:27-38

The prayers that the Christians offered in Assisi today reflected the words of Jesus we have heard now from the Gospel according to St. Luke. They are not easy words to read or to hear, because they call for attitudes and actions that run counter to our human inclinations. How does one respond to the injunction of Jesus, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you and pray for those who maltreat you”? (Luke 6:27)

In preparing for this service, I turned to the life and writings of St. Francis of Assisi. His greeting to people he met by the way was, “Pax et bonum.” “Peace and all good things.” For him the words of Jesus in the gospel offered marching orders. And yet he saw, as Jesus did, and as we must, that human freedom is to be respected, even though humans may sometimes intentionally crash planes into high buildings or start wars or intentionally kill others. Often enough, thank God, human freedom comes to right conclusions, albeit slowly and painfully.

Here is an account of one unfolding story in which Francis found himself an actor: the nearby city of Perugia was experiencing conflict and turmoil. His brothers saw that Francis must have had a vision in his cell, an inspiration to go personally to Perugia to preach there on the gospel. He went, and spoke of peace, and was interrupted by knights on horseback. He turned to them and most likely preached to their backs, as they were galloping away. He scolded them for not attending to God’s word and predicted that the city of Perugia would “fall into civil war, so that one will rise against the other.... Wrath will teach you, for kindness has not taught you.”

The account continues, “Not many days after this ... arms were taken up against those close to them, the citizens fought against the knights, and the nobles attacked the ordinary people; the battle was fought with such fury and slaughter that the neighbors who had been wronged grieved with them.” Peace finally came, but at what a price! (Cf. Celano, *Second Life of St. Francis, Omnibus of Sources*, pp. 194-5) Francis, in his preaching, tried to reflect the perfection of the vision of Jesus. The people of Perugia acted in a human way, unresponsive at first to the grace of God.

Against the background of the words of Jesus and of Francis, I suggest we reflect briefly on September 11 and its worldwide aftermath. For most of October I was in Rome, attending the World Synod of Bishops as a representative of our United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Immediately on arrival, from every quarter I heard expressions of sympathy for the events of 9/11. I quickly learned that this was not simply a tragedy for our country; because of instantaneous worldwide sharing through television, it was seen and felt as an immense tragedy for and by almost the whole human family.

During the Synod Pope John Paul II was with us on all our working days in plenary session. He invited every single synod participant – bishops, religious men and women, laity, and the fraternal delegates from other Christian Churches – to join him at his table for either dinner or supper.

In the second week of our sessions, the Holy Father’s invitation came to me. Nine of us were his guests for dinner, including the four fraternal delegates. After offering grace, the Pope asked me, “Cardinal Keeler, how are the people of Baltimore doing after September 11?” I answered that it seemed to me that the events helped people to see what really mattered in life: relationships with God, with family, with others, with one’s work, and to realize more clearly the fragility of our life here on earth. Then the Holy Father proceeded to involve each of the other dinner guests in the conversation.

As our reflection continued, I recalled what Pope John Paul said nearly two years ago in Jerusalem at a meeting with Jews and Muslims. He reminded all present then that, for all our faith differences,