

New Year's Eve Interfaith Prayer Service

Introduction

Father Watters, I wish to thank you for inviting me to join with you and with leaders of our Baltimore community in thanking God for the blessings of the year just past and in asking God's help for the year that lies ahead.

Before I go further, dear friends, I would like to join with you in expressing our common thanks to our gracious host. I refer, of course, to Father William Watters ... Father Watters, not only has this New Year's Eve prayer service become a landmark event in the life of our religious and civic community, but you have also been a most enterprising pioneer in finding ways to educate the young and serve those in need while continuing to create a vibrant community of faith. All of us offer you our heartfelt thanks!

Do Not Forget the Poor

On this lovely crisp New Year's Eve, we may find ourselves taking stock of our lives. It is the season to evaluate what is going well and not so well. It is the season for resolutions which like old acquaintances are soon forgotten.

But if our resolutions are soon forgotten, let us not forget the advice which the Brazilian Cardinal, Claudio Hummes, offered to the Argentinean Cardinal, Jorge Bergoglio, moments before he was elected Pope. He said to him, "Do not forget the poor."

And in the nearly two years since the election of Pope Francis we have all been amazed and inspired by the way he remembers the poor. Take, for example, his first journey as Pope. It brought him to an island most Americans never heard of, Lampedusa, a Mediterranean island known as "Africa's gateway to Europe." It is a place to which many migrate, and many die on their way. There he remembered and prayed for the migrants who died at sea and called attention to the "globalization of indifference". At the same time, Pope Francis remembers the poor not merely in high profile events; throughout his long service to the Church he has made it a point

to know the poor by name, to know them personally, to pray with them, and to treat them not as the object of his charity but rather as fellow subjects in the sight of God.

Do Not Forget the Poor in the City of Baltimore

Lampedusa, which lies off the coast of Sicily, is far from us but, as the Lord foretold, 'the poor you will always have with you.' The poor are close at hand to us in this city and in this region. And poverty takes many forms ... neighborhoods of row houses boarded up and abandoned; hunger and homelessness in our streets; young people and families decimated by drugs; families grieving over loved ones lost to violence in the streets. Sadly, so many people in our city on this New Year's Eve believe they have little or nothing to look forward to.

Just before Christmas, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake convened civic and religious leaders to pray for an end to violence and for peace and harmony in our city. This evening, Madame Mayor, I wish to thank you for doing so and take this occasion to build upon your important gesture. We too must not forget victims of violence and poverty. But how we remember the poor is also of great importance.

We can think of the poor dispassionately, as if they were mere statistics. Statistics are necessary to help us gauge the challenges we face but how important for us to remember that behind every statistic is a person created in God's image and likeness and called to eternal life. How then should we remember the poor? Following the lead of Pope Francis, allow me to offer a few suggestions, suggestions I direct first of all to myself, and then to you.

How to Remember the Poor

If we would remember the poor, then we must encounter them. A good examination of conscience is whether we know the names of the poor. When we meet the homeless on the street do we hurry past them or have we taken the time to hear their story? Have we remembered that their story is as important in God's eyes as our story, no matter what title or position we may hold in our community? Last year I was edified to discover, quite by accident, that one of my priests not only made it a point to know the names of the poor and to help them personally, but also to pray with them and to dine with them. You won't be surprised to learn that Pope Francis did that same thing when he was the Archbishop of Buenos Aires.

Even as we struggle to meet very basic human needs through safety-net programs, we recognize that nameless, faceless services are not enough. For without love, respect, and personal relationships, our lives make no sense. We shouldn't expect a person whose life makes no sense to pull himself up by his bootstraps into a productive and prosperous life. Whatever religious holy day we celebrate at this time of year - whether Christmas or Hanukah or Kwanzaa - we have an underlying conviction that God cares for us, that he knows and loves us, that he walks with us, and that he is leading us deeper in his love.

In the joy of that conviction we should find the wisdom, love, and courage to help rebuild not just the row houses but the relationships that must exist in any community that is just and peaceful, beginning with family relationships. Without strong families, children and young people suffer. We can't hope to curb drug use and improve academic performance so long as children and young people are deprived of loving families, even if those families are struggling financially. The family is where values can be taught and virtues learned; it's where children's dignity is affirmed and their sights raised higher. When families grow stronger, most other relationships improve: the relationship of students to their teachers and coaches; the relationship of citizens to their civic leaders; and the relationships that exist in and among our churches, synagogues, and mosques.

So let us resolve this New Year to be builders of relationships, especially family relationships, first in our own households and then in our outreach to those in need as individuals & faith communities and as a matter of public policy. If this one resolution is not forgotten but acted upon, no doubt the Lord will smile upon our beloved community of Baltimore now and for many years to come! Happy New Year!