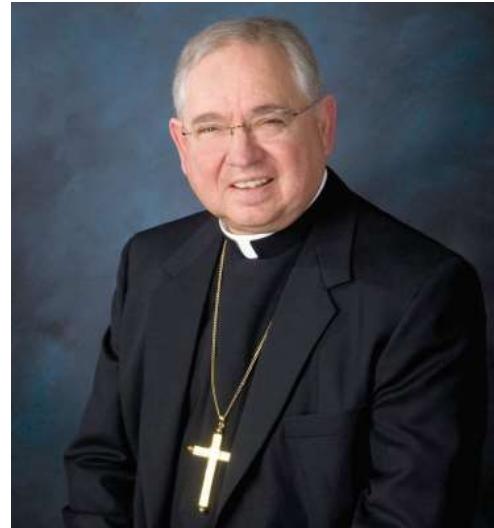


One life, one love: Catholic social teaching and the mystery of the human person

*Georgetown University,
Washington, D.C.*

June 4, 2018



Good morning, my friends!

I am honored to be here to talk about these important issues of Catholic social teaching.

And I want to begin our conversation with a brief snapshot of our experience in Los Angeles.

As you know, we are the largest Catholic community in the country. We cover a territory about the size of New Jersey — we have about 5 million Catholics in an overall population of 11 million.

Our churches are filled with people who come from other nations. Every day we carry out our ministries in more than 40 languages.

Our Church is young and it is daily growing. Just to give you a sense: in Los Angeles we baptize about 60,000 infants every year. That is more than the total number of infant baptisms in Chicago and New York combined.

I tell people: if you want to see what the Church will look like in the future, you should come to Los Angeles.

But my friends, there is another side to LA, a more sobering set of statistics.

Every night in the Los Angeles area, we have 55,000 people who have no place to call home. They are sleeping on sidewalks and under bridges, in parking lots in their cars. There are “tent cities” now in many of our neighborhoods, even in the suburbs. The fastest growing category of homeless is children.

In the shadow of our Cathedral downtown, we have one of the world’s largest prisons. All told, we have about 20,000 men and women behind bars, the vast majority are black and Latino.

And just down the road from the Cathedral, in a neighborhood that is almost entirely Spanish-speaking, there are nine abortion clinics within a one-mile radius. Sadly, they are busy. More abortions are performed in Los Angeles than any city except New York — and most of the women targeted are poor and minorities.

Everywhere we see signs of the breakdown of marriage and the family. We have 30,000 kids in the LA foster care system.

Nearly 20 percent of the people in Los Angeles live below the poverty line. And every day it seems like the distance is growing between those who have what they need to lead a dignified life, and those who do not.

We see this in obvious and also not-so-obvious ways — like the high rates of pollution and groundwater contamination in our poorest communities.

Finally, there are more than 1 million undocumented immigrants in Los Angeles. And every day we deal with the realities of deportations. That means mothers and fathers being torn from their homes, from their children and loved ones.

So, that is a snapshot of Los Angeles “by the numbers.” And of course, for those of us in the Church, every one of these “numbers” represents a soul who has been made in the image of our Creator and redeemed by the sacrifice of God’s only Son.

The point I want to make is this: The issues we deal with in Los Angeles are unique only in scale. Every day in every city across the country, Catholic communities confront these same types of injustice and insults to human dignity.

The question we all face is this: where do we start in the face of so much human misery? How do we set priorities, what criteria are we going to use? How do we change our society so there is less suffering, less injustice?

In Los Angeles, we have tried to unite all our work for life, justice and peace under a single banner. We call it “OneLife LA.”

For us “OneLife” means promoting and protecting the sanctity and dignity of every human person, who is loved by God with a personal love.

And by God’s grace, we are doing some beautiful things in Los Angeles.

The “pulverization” of the human person

In our work in Los Angeles, we have come to see the great challenge of our times. And that is the disappearance of the human person.

We are living in a society where God no longer matters and the human person is on the verge of being forgotten too. The sense of our great dignity as children of God, the sense

of God's loving design for creation and the divine meaning of our lives — all of this is fading from the hearts and minds of this generation.

We realize that this process has been gradual and that it has been going on for a long time.

Fifty years ago, when he was still a cardinal, St. John Paul II described our challenge this way. He said: "The evil of our time consists ... in a pulverization of the fundamental uniqueness of the human person. To this disintegration ... we must oppose ... a kind of 'recapitulation' of the mystery of the person."

Pope Francis has been saying the same thing in our times. He has said: "We are experiencing a moment of the annihilation of man as the image of God."

And everywhere in our society, we can see what they are talking about. We can see it in the way people in our economy are more and more treated as objects that can be replaced or tools to be used to further the ambitions of others.

And we can see it, too, sadly in the human wreckage around us, the lives lost in addictions and wrong choices that lead to despair and degradation. We see it in the random cruelty and violence that we have come to accept as the daily state of affairs in our society.

Friends, in this moment — as a Church, as Christians — we need to be united in the urgent mission of proclaiming and defending the mystery of the human person in our times.

This is the central task for Catholic social teaching today. Even more, it is a challenge for our whole project of the new evangelization.

Time for saints

Now more than ever, we need to raise up a new generation of disciples, a new generation of saints.

This is a call to you and to me — to everyone in the Church. We need to be thinking in new ways about our identity and mission as Christians, as followers of Christ.

The Church exists to evangelize. Period. There is no other reason for the Church. We are not called to be social workers or advocates. We are called to be apostles and saints.

Our mission is to share the good news that Jesus has revealed to us — about who God is and how much he loves us; about who we are, and the way he has shown us to live.

In our work of evangelization, we need to be careful that our message does not get tangled up in politics or today's fashionable ideas about happiness or "well-being."

We are not here to provide solutions to problems in society. What we proclaim is true liberation — the pathway that leads to eternal life.

We can change the world by changing people's hearts — by making God's love present and leading men and women to find him and to discover their true dignity as his children.

And you and I, we are called to carry out our Christian mission in the world — person to person, heart to heart.

The great French apostle, Venerable Madeleine Delbrel, used to say: "Mission means doing the very work of Christ wherever we happen to be. We will not be the Church, and salvation will not reach the ends of the earth, unless we help save the people in the very situations in which we live."

These are words for us, my friends.

We have a mission in life and that mission is to live as children of God and to try to become like Jesus — to see as he sees, to feel and think as he does; to be holy as he is holy. And God is calling all of us to seek holiness, to be saints, each in our own way, in the circumstances of our ordinary life. In our homes, at work, in school and in our communities.

We become missionaries by being good neighbors. When we seek holiness, it opens our hearts to building God's kingdom of love and justice and peace. When we seek holiness, it leads us deeper and deeper into the lives of our brothers and sisters — their joys and hopes, their miseries and misfortune.

No single-issue saints

The love that Jesus Christ is calling us to is concrete and personal. It is expressed through human contact, through works of mercy and sharing our lives with others.

We have a vocation to love. The great American apostle, Dorothy Day once said: "Our lives must be a pure act of love, repeated many times over."

This is a beautiful truth, this is how we are called to live. We are called to love as we have been loved and through our love, to reveal to others what great love God has for every person.

The salvation that we proclaim to our neighbors is a salvation of the whole person, body and soul.

That is why there is no "polarization" in the communion of saints; and there are no "single-issue" saints.

The saints teach us to see with the eyes of Christ. They teach us to see that every human life is sacred and special, no matter what stage of development or condition of life. And the saints teach us that whenever human life is threatened, whenever the image of God is obscured and violated, we are called to rise up and defend it.

When we think about St. Mother Teresa, we usually think about her charity to the poor and the dying and her defense of the unborn. But Mother Teresa did not stop there. She also raised a prophetic voice against war and the arms race, against the death penalty, and the greed and inequality she saw in the global economy.

Blessed Oscar Romero was martyred for his defense of human rights and social justice. But when you read his homilies, it is striking how often he speaks out against abortion, artificial contraception, and divorce.

In fact, I was reading one of his homilies the other day, and I want to share this thought with you. Blessed Romero said: "Matrimonial fidelity and the morality of preserving the life that begins in the womb of a woman are ancient themes, not new ones. And the Church must defend them even if it means losing applause and being attacked by the public."

Friends, in our defense of the human person, we need to remember what Blessed Romero and all the saints know. If we want to promote the sanctity and dignity of the human person in our times, then we also must protect the sanctity and permanence of married love and promote the beauty of family life.

We also need to have a special care to defend the most vulnerable.

In the logic of God's love, the weakest and most vulnerable in society must always be our priority in the Church. That is why abortion will always be the fundamental social injustice and priority in the Church — because it means the direct killing of the most defenseless members in the human family.

But like the saints, we cannot stop there. We need to fight for the human person. We need to defend the sanctity and dignity of the person everywhere and to work for his salvation.

One Life, One Love

My friends, let me offer a few final thoughts.

We are living in a time of confusion in our society, when the reality of God is fading away, and the reality of the human person is disappearing, too.

We are becoming strangers to our own selves. We no longer know who we are or what is inside us. And many of our brothers and sisters are falling by the wayside, discarded and lost.

But God does not leave us orphaned or alone. Jesus Christ still brings freedom for every human heart and his Church is still the hope for a fallen world.

That means you and that means me.

In this moment, God is sending us out to be his witnesses. We are called to testify that this world still speaks of God, that creation is his handiwork, and that he is still carrying out his intentions in history, his beautiful plan of love.

Life is one and God's love is one. One life, one love. We are surrounded by God's goodness and he loves us with a love that is greater than any power on earth.

And we are made for so much more, we are made to be made divine! The God of all Creation wants to share his blessed life with us! The Son of God became a Son of Man — so that you and I might become sons and daughters of God. This is our dignity and destiny. This is what God dreams for our lives.

We need to look in the mirror every day and really believe that this is true. And we need to share this truth with the people of our times.

Thank you for listening. And I look forward to our conversation.

Most Reverend José H. Gomez is the Archbishop of Los Angeles, the nation's largest Catholic community. He also serves as President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.