

Peacemaking.

Bishop John Michael Botean

A word or two about me. I am a bishop, I am not an academic, a frustrated academic maybe but not a scholar. I am a preacher. So what I typically do is not give lectures but I give homilies. I preach. So today may feel a lot more like a homily than a lecture but I ask you to approach it with an open heart.

You never know what is going to face you. I have been a bishop since 1996 and I was administrator of our diocese in 1993. The Romanian Byzantine Catholic diocese of the U.S. and Canada goes from Montreal, Quebec to Anaheim, California, and it is 21 little nano-communities because the Romanians never wanted to leave home, they just did when they had to. So we have a very small population in the United States. I understand there are now more Romanians in the rest of Europe than in Romania, but that is kind of a new situation.

So, during my first visit *ad limina apostolorum*, the visit we bishops make every five years to the Holy See, it was with St. Pope John Paul II, and he was the only one who would actually meet with every one of the bishops for five minutes or so. And as I walked in to his office he was looking at a map of the United States. As I walked in, he said, “You have a big diocese.” And he went on to ask questions about family, and catechesis and the usual standard questions. And at the end, I said to him, “Holy Father, we are probably the smallest diocese in the Catholic Church, and so we really need your prayers.” And he said to me, and forgive my Polish accent, “Little diocese, big bishop.” [laughter] And from that moment I knew that you know you have made it in life when you have been insulted by the pope, and now I can say, insulted by a saint. [laughter]

And as homilies always should be starting, we start with realizing that Jesus Christ is with us here in this room and we open our hearts to Him, and our minds and our ears to Him. We hear him speaking to us from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 6, verses 27 to 36:

27 “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32 “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that

to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

As students of English I would ask you to join me in this prayer. Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman who will be canonized by Pope Francis on October 13 in Rome. Please pray aloud with me:

“God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.

He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments.

Therefore, I will trust Him, whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.”

As I mentioned, I am a preacher not a teacher or a professor, so even though I have been talking about this particular subject which is called peace building for this particular conference, for a long time, it has not been necessarily within the context of Catholic social teaching, and so the big challenge for me was to reflect on what I typically do talk about in the context of Catholic social teaching and try to make the connections

The first thing I had to do, although the principles are there, and I agree with the principles of Catholic social teaching, and my attitude towards them is basically that they are great...but they are not enough. It is a start. As I was looking at the Compendium of the Catholic Social Doctrine of the Church, there is a letter at the very beginning from Cardinal Angelo Sodano to Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino who was, at that time, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. And in the first line of that letter, Cardinal Sodano says, “Throughout the course of her history, and particularly in the last hundred years, the Church has never failed, in the words of Pope Leo XIII, to speak ‘the words that are hers’ with regard to questions concerning life in society.” And that is how I see all the elements of CST: They are speaking the Church’s words, out of the Church’s mind, which I hope is the mind of Christ, but speaking them not so much to herself or to her members, to the members of the Body of Christ, but to the world in the context in which the world exists. And I take as an example of that Pope Leo XIII in his response to the

end of the social situation that had applied for centuries for many centuries but had come to an end with the beginning of the industrial revolution and the development of a capitalist economy.

Like anyone in the seminary, I had many spiritual directors, who were spiritual directors in the seminary, and my first spiritual director, first spiritual father, is now the archbishop of a major archdiocese in the United States. And the last spiritual director I had is not very much, he is a married priest, and his daughter was the recipient of the second miracle that allowed for the canonization of St. Edith Stein, so he had the unique situation of being a married priest, celebrating Mass at the altar with St. Pope John Paul II the mass of canonization. But he was the person who more or less taught me what I know about the Gospel, what I believe about Jesus, for which my first spiritual director said, "The man is a lunatic." And to many people he is. So, if you think I am crazy, I am in good company.

In the triad of verbs that we are discussing in terms of Catholic social teaching, see, judge, and act, I want to focus on the first one, to see, because that is probably the hardest part, the part that makes the rest of it work or not. If we do not actually see reality, then how can we judge what is going on? If we draw the blinders of our own context, or culture or language, and cannot get beyond that, if we cannot get beyond the way it has always been, in our family or in the world around us, then we cannot judge what is going on in the world, and especially we cannot judge from God's point of view, and if we cannot judge, how can we act as God would have us act?

This is a quotation from Jacques Ellul, he died in 1984, a philosopher, a theologian, a sociologist and a Christian anarchist. He wrote:

God intervenes radically only in response to a radical attitude on the part of the believer, radical not in regard to political means but in regard to faith. And the believer who is radical in his faith has rejected all means other than those of faith. The appeal to and use of violence in Christian actions increase in exact proportion to the decrease of faith. Unbelief is the true root of the Christian championship of violence.

So, when I'm talking about peacemaking or peace building, the one context that is most important is the peace that we make or build within ourselves in relationship to God, by the power and action of the Holy Spirit, but when I am talking about peacemaking in the Church, what I mean is what I call Gospel non-violence, something that, as a word, is often not understood or not even thought. People do not give much thought to non-violence because they have decided that it is not good for anything.

Pope Francis, in fiftieth World Day of Peace message, said: "To be true followers of Jesus today also means embracing his teaching about non-violence." And in that same message he goes on to quote Pope Benedict in his Angelus address of February 18, 2007: For Christians, non-violence is not merely practical behavior but a person's way of being, the attitude of one who is so convinced of God's love and power, that he or she is not afraid to tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Love of one's enemy constitutes the nucleus of the Christian revolution." It

is this Christian revolution brought about, but also incarnated, by Jesus Christ, that I think we find so hard to actually see, when we look to see what is going on. If Christ is the Redeemer, non-Christians are very entitled to ask, “Why isn’t the world more redeemed? If Christ is the Redeemer, why isn’t the world more redeemed?”

Morally, the world is no better off than at the time of Christ. More people were killed in the last century, the twentieth century, the twentieth century, more people are being tortured at this moment, more people are starving at the rate of one every nine seconds, while more people are living in unheard of levels of luxury. Therefore, Jesus and the Christian faith can be regarded by so many in the world as simply another form of myth. To escape from the harsh realities of existence, evil and death. Evil and death, are still the cornerstones of human life. The world is no better off perhaps because Christ existed. In fact, an argument can be made that the world is worse off, because more people were slaughtered by the group identified by sociologists as Christians than by any other single group in history.

My point of view is not that of a Buddhist. My faith is Christian and so, when the question comes to me as it came to Peter twenty centuries ago, “who do you say that I am?” I am a Christian so I answer, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God, you are God, the Word of God, the Word made flesh, you are the incarnation of the power that made the universe, and that in your person and teaching, in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ, I find meaning, hope and the possibility of redemption for myself and for the world.

We need our context in order to see, and the context in which one needs to see the Christian revolution, is the image I have shown on the screen. [insert photo] Many of you perhaps have seen it. It is a photograph called the Hubble Ultra-Deep Field Photograph, from the Hubble telescope, and it was taken over the course of four hundred orbits of earth, with 800 exposures, taken from September 24, 2003 through January 16, 2004. When we are looking at this image, we are looking back 13 billion years or four to eight hundred after the Big Bang. On the image behind me, those are not stars. In that photograph there are approximately 10,000 galaxies and each of those galaxies contains within them 10 million to 1 trillion stars. The average star is roughly a million times the size of earth. And yet with all that stuff the universe is more than 98 percent empty space. This photograph contains one thirteen-millionth of the entire night sky.

So, how important do you think you are? How important do you think you are in that context, in the context of a vast universe that is so vast we cannot even imagine it? How smart do you think you are?

If we imagine all there is. Everything. The macrocosm, and the microcosm, macrocosm is the image that is only one thirteenth-million of the entire night sky, and the microcosm is the trillions of atoms that are in my thumb. The past, the present, the future, everything that ever was and ever will be, the whole thing, the whole enchilada. Out of all that, how much do we know? I can’t possibly make a dot small enough to represent what we know. Yet, out of this little speck

of what we know about the universe, we make decisions, we make choices, decide what is right and what is wrong. And in the context of our decisions and choices, we try to live through the mystery of our lives – why are we here, rather than not here? Why is that we who are here, and I who am here – and when you think about families, there is my great-grandma and my great-grandpa, and they were a couple, and then there are my grandparents, and then my parents, and then me. Take out any one of those people in that family tree, and I am not here. And in your family it is exactly the same thing. Who would you be if your mom had a headache that night? We had a big power outage in the United States back in the 60s, and it was caused, I think, by a raccoon, a power raccoon who ate through some power lines and plunged the entire East coast of the United States into darkness, and exactly nine months to the day after that poor raccoon gave his life, the hospitals were full, women were giving birth in the hallways and in the corridors because there were not enough rooms for all the babies being born, nine months after that raccoon.

Who is in charge? It's not me. And yet, with my little speck of dust and consciousness that I am, that came haphazardly into the universe or so it seems, I make decisions about life and death, for myself and for other people, by my choices. And into this life, as into every life, come the twin disasters of evil and death. And we live our lives trying to figure out what to do about evil and what to do about death.

So, I am born and my life goes on and at some point I die. Now, when I was about seven, for Easter, my brother and I got baby ducklings. And we were living in a neighborhood that was just beginning to develop and so we were the only house in a large area, and there was nothing but grass around us, and I went out with my little pet duckling and we were walking and I couldn't see him anymore and I was looking for him, and I stepped down and I heard a crunch sound, and I felt it under my feet, and there was my duck. And I picked it up and I took it to my dad and said, "Fix this" because he could fix everything. Well he took a shoebox, and put the little duckling in it and said, "I am afraid I can't fix that." And in a little while that duckling was dead. What do you think happened to me at that moment? This reality, death, came back to affect my life at that moment, and it affects my life at every moment from then on. And, I try and make my choices based on trying to get away from this reality, and every choice is based on this: I don't want to die. Nobody wants to die. When someone says they want to die it means they want to end their pain. And, despite what we hear in the Gospels, from the point of view of human knowledge, we have no idea what happens here, after death. We tend to have a dichotomous consciousness and so we either we go in the living in one way or another, in heaven, in consciousness, or we fall out of being into nothingness altogether.

My point is, you can't reason your way out of that existential set of questions. By the use of reason alone, you cannot decide what you can do about evil and about death. Nothing.

Everyone wants to know the mystery of human life, throughout human history, and so we have always tried to get in touch with a power greater than ourselves, with the power that is behind the

world we experience. And, whether it was the ancient Roman world that used oracles and auguries and the flight of birds and the entrails of animals, to see what is the will of that power that is behind us, that is behind the universe, what the will of that god might be. Or, whether it is a more developed religion, a later religion, the religion of the Lord, since we are not supposed to use the divine name anymore, the name that was given to Moses and the people of Israel. Or the religion of the followers of the One who was born of that people, we want to know what God's will is.

If we are lucky enough to get some of God's perspective on all of this, on the entire universe of which we are such a small, infinitesimally small, part, we call that revelation. And if you are fortunate enough to get God's eye view on this whole reality, upon the mystery of human life and the enormity of the universe, you'd better listen to it. You have to listen to those words. Because if those words claim to tell you how to get out of evil and out of death, you had better listen, or at least don't change them.

And yet, when we look at the Gospel of St. Luke for instance, and we hear the one phrase that Scripture scholars are universally agreed was unique – and a lot of the words of Jesus were words of common Jewish wisdom of his day – something he said that was unique to him, and that his co-religionists at the time said, “we simply can't go along with this, this is not the Torah, this is not God's will” and those unique words are “Love your enemies.”

We live in a world that is overwhelmed by evil, and in which no one escapes death. The tendency is to run to entertainment and sports. It becomes obvious in the extreme that the little speck of dust that we have, can't do anything, can't teach us anything, about overcoming evil and death, and our reason is absolutely helpless. So, if you don't know how to overcome evil and death, and God tells you the way to overcome evil and death, and God shows you the way to overcome evil and death in the person and ministry and message of Jesus, then you really have something, and you dare not change it.

September 20, 1920, a billion or more people living, hoping, thinking, feeling, trying to make some sense out of life, having children, having dreams, and we can't remember their names. September 20, 2120, and who will remember our names? I asked before, how important you think you are in the context of the entire universe, and the answer that Jesus gives is, “To God, to the power that is behind all that, you are of infinite importance.” Can you imagine that? “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever might believe in him shall not perish, but have life eternal,” and if we do not want to perish, perhaps we shouldn't kill either.

I was kind of shocked. There is a group, a religious group, it is only about a hundred years old, not quite a hundred years old. It is called the Bruderhof, it was started in Germany and now it is in the United States also. And they publish this great periodical called the “Plow.” And I was reading this quarter's Plow and something there “hit me in between the eyes” as we say in

America, by a line in an article by Peter Monson. He wrote: “We don’t need a shallow social justice Christianity that lurches from one progressive cause to the next. We can have the real thing, the way of life Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. This life is there for the having.” Can you imagine that? This is a group of people committed to non-violence, committed to Christian community, committed to community property – they don’t own anything individually – trying to live a life following Jesus directly. just like St. Benedict, just like St. Francis, just like the great movements and great saints of our own tradition. And they say, “That life is there for the having.”

So, what do we do? We don’t trust that God is really going to be able to deliver on the promise. Now, consider this. We believe in an improbability and an impossibility. The improbability is that Jesus is really the incarnation of the power behind the universe, the incarnation of God. And, we believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that’s impossible. We’ve all buried somebody. At home, I buried Aunt Helen a few years ago and I do not expect to see her when I get back home. She is in the grave. And that’s that. But, it isn’t.

You see, our faith is based in power, real power. Not the power that comes from economics, from stealing from your mouth so that I can put it in mine. Not the power that comes from politics, that I might arm myself so that I can have my way in the world. But, the power of the empty tomb. The power to conquer evil and death.

Which one of us has not been a little Hitler in our time. Hurt by somebody, attacked by somebody, probably just verbally, probably by a brother or a sister, or a coworker, or by the bishop. And what’s the first thing that comes to mind? You want to squash them, you just want to put them out of existence, in that moment when you are really, really angry. With your little bit of power, you want to destroy somebody, and then experience that glow if that person falls into some kind of misfortune. How stupid is that? How stupid? At a certain point it becomes really clear how stupid it is to fix on the problem of evil and death in political terms.

Imagine the utopia that you prefer, a libertarian utopia, a communist utopia, a capitalist utopia, whatever it is. And, imagine that in whatever utopia you are living, a mother is sitting in a park, with her child, and out of the trees comes a pack of wild dogs, they take her child and maul it to death. To that mother, how is your utopia doing? To that mother, how is your perfect society doing? That is the un-peace that generates all the un-peace in the world, this problem of evil and death. There is no reasonable solution to the problem of evil and death.

And so Catholic Social Teaching, like an antecedent to that teaching, the just war theory - or more specifically the Christian just war theory because the original just war theory was articulated by a Stoic philosopher named Cicero - Catholic social teaching is a way of the Church, speaking out of her own experience of Christ and His ability to conquer evil and death, talking to the world that does not believe, and telling the world how to be a little bit better world. It’s not telling us how to live our lives. Jesus is the one who tells us how to live our lives: Love

your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, the one who asks for your coat, give him your shirt, be kind, be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful.

Well, if you don't believe that Jesus is the Son of God, fine, you can think of him as a great Hassidic rabbi, or a great philosopher of one kind or another, put his teaching alongside anybody else's, and that's fine. And then you can use your reason to come up with whatever problems and solutions you might want to come up with, in terms of the problems of the world. But, if you accept that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, that He is the one sent by God to overcome evil and death, if you accept the person, then you need to accept the message.

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk, in the forties through the sixties, who lived at Gethsemani Abbey, and he is one of the people Pope Francis mentioned, along with Dorothy Day, when he visited the United States a couple of years ago. Merton was speaking, really, of the vision of Christ in an American context. Merton, speaking from his monastery, from his place of sharing, what the Second Vatican Council called the "school of perfect love," he tried to engage the world and he did engage the world, but he knew how to engage the world. In a letter he wrote to Rabbi Everett Gendler in 1962, and speaking of religious symbols, Merton wrote, "at the same time, I am impressed with the fact that all these things, are little more than symbols. Thank God they are at least symbols and valid ones, but where are we going to turn for some really effective political action. As soon as one gets involved in the machinery of politics, one gets involved in its demonic futilities, and the great current that sweeps everything towards no one knows what."

We have a problem because we don't see where we actually live. We live in a socially mediated reality that tells us that common sense, true, that this is up and this is down, and you might want to get along with your neighbor, but while doing so, you need to "keep your powder dry," that is your gunpowder, keep your weapons ready to defend yourself, because you don't want resurrection. What you want is survival and political structures exist in order to provide survival. We call that security, especially national security. Now, don't get me wrong. I am not saying we have to abolish political structures because, for one thing, we're not going to. The context we live in is not Jesus' context, it is not the context of the early Church, the church of the martyrs. In that context, the Roman empire was a political structure and the economic structure. And the Roman empire, according to an American theologian, a former Jesuit and a noted biblical theologian, from the fifties and sixties, John L. McKenzie, he said, the empire "was like gravity, it was just a fact of nature." What were you going to do about it? You were going to live your Christian life in the context of that gravity. You ignore gravity at your own peril. If you fall into a hole, you're not going to go up, you're going to go down. And it was in that context of the Roman empire, that is, not a democratic system, not something that I think I can change with my own vote or with my taxes, but something that is just presented to me as the context in which I have to live, in that context in which they lived their lives, instead of killing, they died. It's called martyrdom.

In the first three centuries closest to Jesus, the Christian Church was universally non-violent. Every father and mother of the early Church say that a Christian cannot engage in war or in violent self-defense. And these are three hundred tough years of persecution. The canons of Hippolytus state that if you are a pimp, if you make your living by selling other people for sex, you have to give that up if you want to be baptized. And, similarly, if you are not in the military, you can't join the military. If you are in the military, you can't obey an order to kill. That's in 215 A.D. Origen says, "By our prayers and works of mercy, we are doing more than armies." To kill anyone intentionally, for any reason, including self-defense, for the first two hundred years of the Church's existence, that person was excommunicated. Then what happens? Constantine. And we call him, especially in the Byzantine Church, we call him St. Constantine. For all of his life, he was a pagan worshipper of the sun, but then he began to explore Christianity, and historians think he was not baptized during his life but he was baptized on his deathbed, and if he was baptized on his deathbed then he went straight to heaven, and if he's in heaven, then he's a saint. He was the one who saw the sign, the vision of the cross in the sky – "in this sign you will conquer" – and remember he was a pagan Roman, he believed in omens and oracles and auguries. So, what he did was put that sign of the cross on his shields as he went into battle, and he won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, and he began to tolerate Christianity, and then made Christianity the religion of the Roman empire, and then gave pagan temples to Christians so that they could have there worship there. Now, pagan temples are fine for Christian worship. Your living room is fine for Christian worship. It was understood that the temple of the living God is the human person and to violate a human person, that was sacrilege. But, now we have this nice temple, and the empire gave it to us, and so what we have to do is thank the empire and support it. Even St. Paul had said you have to pray for the emperor and we do pray for the emperor. That is why Origen said, "we do more by our prayers than you do with your army."

We don't really believe that do we? We don't really believe that. To that extent, we are like the people of Israel and Elijah who is trying to bring the Word of God to the people of Israel. And he had this encounter with the priests of another religion, the priests of Baal. And he said, "You set up your sacrifice and I will set up my sacrifice." You now the story. The priests of Baal set up their sacrifice and were dancing around and calling out to their god for fire and slashing themselves and nothing happened. And Elijah says to get some water, and pour it on his sacrifice, and get some more water, and the sacrifice was flooded and Elijah prayed to God and God sent down fire from heaven which consumed the sacrifice. And Elijah says, "Now choose." Remember that Elijah was the enemy of the king. King Ahab calls him the "disturber of Israel." That's always a problem. And that is why he says to the people of Israel "You choose, this Baal who has no power or the Lord, your God, whom you saw lit this sacrifice." And it is the same for us. Do we know where our power comes from, or do we think we know?

One of the things about me that you probably don't know. I guess there is a Youtube video about me, and they tricked me by telling me the video was about someone else, but it was really about me, because I was the only American bishop who wrote a letter to my people opposing the

invasion of Iraq in 2002. And, for that, I got some calls of complaint, but it made a little news because news of the letter made it to Iraq in less than 24 hours. Soldiers were reading that and they were calling the Military Archdiocese of the United States to complain. People misunderstood my letter. I said that in my judgment, for my diocese, was unjust. There is no such thing as a legitimate preemptive war, even in Christian just war theory. And so participating in that war was participating in unjust killing, and unjust killing is by definition murder and it is not permitted. And people thought that because I said it was not permitted, I was saying I was going to excommunicate people. I wasn't saying that. I took a call from one reporter, from the Associated Press, and he asked how many people I thought my letter would affect, and I said I wasn't sure, maybe a dozen or two dozen people in the military from my little diocese. But, the Military Archdiocese said that under canon law, the soldiers were under their jurisdiction and they said the war was fine.

There is a photo of a little girl in Iraq, the only survivor in her family, and they didn't understand English, they hadn't understood the orders that had been shouted at them by the American soldiers to stop when they were seen on the road, and so they were fired upon and her entire family was killed. This photograph was not in any newspaper in the United States. It was in the Irish Times. America is a free country, right?

After my experience in the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising yesterday, I am almost ashamed to be talking to you, people from Poland, Kazakhstan, Montenegro, Ukraine, about non-violence. In my cozy little rocking chair in the United States, we don't even get to see that kind of stuff. But, what I say to you is what Jesus says to you. I don't know how you are going to work it out in your lives, but the Word that created the universe says "Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you, pray for those who abuse you, be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful."

