



Catholic Social Thought and Courageous Leadership

Facing the COVID-19 pandemic, political polarization, entrenched racism, and persistent violence, it seems easy or expedient to withdraw from the world. As Pope Francis advised young people:

Take care not to yield to the temptation of a disenchantment which paralyzes the intellect and the will, or that apathy which is a radical form of pessimism about the future. These attitudes end either in a flight from reality towards vain utopias, or else in selfish isolation and a cynicism deaf to the cry for justice, truth, and humanity which rises up around us and within us.¹

When so tempted, we must recall our tradition of courage.

Courage, David Hollenbach, S.J., writes, is a Christian virtue that is not just strength of will or fearlessness, but is "strength of will *in the pursuit of justice*."² Courage takes two forms. The first is endurance of "those suffering persecution for justice sake." The second form is one of daring, involving passion—and even anger—inspiring action for justice. This courage empowers our commitment to the poor and to social change when the going is difficult, when efforts meet with little success, or even when we experience retaliation from others.

Courage, however, is not enough. What our world and our Church need so badly is courageous leadership. Far too many leaders are followers—tracking the polls, press approval, the trends, or their party.

In contrast, Henri Nouwen calls for Christian leadership reflecting the realities of pain, struggle, and opposition:

The task of future Christian leaders is not to make a little contribution to the solution of the pains and tribulations of their time, but to identify and announce the ways in which Jesus is leading God's people out of slavery, through the desert to a new land of freedom. Christian leaders have the arduous task of responding to personal struggles, family conflicts, national calamities, and international tensions with an articulate faith in God's real presence.³

This kind of leadership, Nouwen continues, requires resisting all the ways in which society and culture would seduce us to accept the status quo or the comforts promised to those who refuse to "rock the boat":

They have to say "no" to every form of fatalism, defeatism, accidentalism or incidentalism which make people believe that statistics are telling us the truth. They have to say "no" to every form of despair in which human life is seen as a pure matter of good or bad luck. They have to say "no" to sentimental attempts to make people develop a spirit of resignation or stoic indifference in the face of the unavailability of pain, suffering, and death. In short, they have to say "no" to the secular world and proclaim in unambiguous terms that the incarnation of God's Word, through whom all things came into being, has made even the smallest event of human history into Kairos, that is, an opportunity to be led deeper into the heart of Christ.⁴

We may call it courage, determination, or perseverance. Pope Francis calls it carrying the cross:

This is not an ornamental cross or an ideological cross, but it is the cross of life, the cross of one's duty, the cross of making sacrifices for others with love—for parents, for children, for the family, for friends, and even for enemies—the cross of being ready to be in solidarity with the poor, to strive for justice and peace.⁵

Our call is to bring this courage in abundance into a world desperate for courageous leaders.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope Francis. (2015, September 15). *Address to Students, Visit to Cuba* at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150920_cuba-giovani.html.
- 2 David Hollenbach, S.J. (1988). *Justice, Peace, & Human Rights*. The Crossroad Publishing Co., 220. (Emphasis in original.)
- 3 Henri J. M. Nouwen. (1989). *In the Name of Jesus*. The Crossroad Publishing Co., 67-68.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Pope Francis. (1916, June 16). *Angelus Message*, at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20160619.html.