



Pope Francis' Address to Congress

A Strategic American Political Theology

BY ALEX MIKULICH, PH.D.

Pope Francis' historic address to a Joint Session of the U.S. Congress on September 24, 2015, addressed three fundamental crises.

First, he addresses an ecological crisis in which the very life of the planet is threatened. Then, he presents a socio-economic crisis in which the benefits of society tend to flow to the top while the poorest and most vulnerable among us bear ever-increasing and death-dealing burdens. Finally, he poses a spiritual-cultural crisis in which disconnections between persons and nature, between the self and others,

and between the self and authentic human and ecological development, that is, the fullest potential of one and all, block transformation necessary for the future.

These crises demand a theological vision rooted in spiritual practice equal to the task, that is, a strategy that offers a way out of the social, political, economic, and ecological impasses that endanger "our common home." Pope Francis boldly offers, I suggest, a strategic American political theology and spirituality for our time.

His address is provocative, not because he reiterates the major principles of Catholic social teaching well (he does), but for the way he frames his invitation to dialogue about the great crises of our time around four great Americans: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton.

It is striking that in a major address to Congress emphasizing faithful political leadership and citizenship for the common good, the Pope cites only one American—Abraham Lincoln—who devoted his life to formal public office. In contrast, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton each devoted themselves, in their unique ways, to the "least of these" (MT 25:40). As Pope Francis invites in the *Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #48), "I prefer a Church that is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church that is unhealthy by being confined and clinging to its own security." King, Day, and Merton each risked, indeed sacrificed, their whole lives for the most vulnerable members of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Pope Francis begins by quoting one of the classic statements of American

democracy, President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. This frames the Pope's "political" approach, not as narrowly partisan but as the shared pursuit of a people to enjoy the fruits of freedom for one and all. Pope Francis recalls Lincoln's immortal call "to have a new birth of freedom." A "new birth of freedom" Lincoln affirmed, depends upon "us, the living...to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced." Pope Francis calls us to the unfinished work of caring for the most vulnerable creatures among us, human and non-human, in our one and common home, the earth.

Yet liberty is not enough. If freedom is real and authentic—that is human—it must be equitable.

Pope Francis recalls "the march Martin Luther King led from Selma to Montgomery 50 years ago as part of the campaign to fulfill his 'dream' of full civil and political rights for African Americans. That dream continues to inspire us all." The Pope re-awakens us to the way dreams touch "the deepest and truest in the life of the people."

Such a re-awakening demands that we too march with the most vulnerable among us across the symbolic and practical bridges that have yet to be built for true freedom and equality. Pope Francis re-awakens us to remember how many of our ancestors were once migrants seeking freedom and that we must "educate new generations not to turn their backs on our 'neighbors' and everything

around us." The Pope reminds us that "the first contacts were often turbulent and violent" and that "we must not repeat the sins and errors of the past."

Pope Francis turns our attention to two Catholic Americans, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. "In these times when social concerns are so important," says Pope Francis, "I cannot fail to mention the Servant of God Dorothy Day who founded the Catholic Worker movement. Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints."

Drawing upon Day's passionate and integrated care for the poor and the earth, Pope Francis stresses that the "great effort" today is the

Pope Francis calls us to the unfinished work of caring for the most vulnerable creatures among us, human and non-human, in our one and common home, the earth.

"creation and distribution of wealth." This great effort must attend to the "right use of natural resources and the proper application of technology and the proper harnessing of the spirit of enterprise" in a way that is both "inclusive and sustainable." The Catholic Worker movement continues to passionately witness Day's practices of inclusivity and sustainability.

Pope Francis concludes with Merton, underscoring the need for a fundamental orientation away from our selfish human desires and toward God. Pope Francis highlights how Merton's own conversion to prayer and contemplation enabled him to "challenge the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and the Church."

It is instructive how Martin Luther King Jr. knew that he needed time in prayer and contemplation with Thomas Merton. Indeed, the historian Albert Raboteau records how at the time of his assassination "plans were underway for Martin Luther King to make a retreat with Thomas Merton at Our Lady of Gethsemane Abbey."¹

While King and Merton were not able to meet, Pope Francis calls us to root our work for liberty, equality, inclusion, and sustainability in prayerful contemplation and dialogue.

Pope Francis, I believe, offers us a rich vision and practice of a political theology and spirituality built upon four cornerstones of liberty, equality, inclusion and sustainability, and contemplation and dialogue.

May we take up this vision and practice, drawing upon the wisdom of these four great Americans so that we may yet realize our common destiny to thrive in the unity of God's creation—our one common home.

ENDNOTES

¹ Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995. p. 166.