

Thank you Monsignor and good morning guys,

Before we start, let me share a bit of a preamble. I really struggled to come up with something meaningful to share with you this morning. My thought was to approach a timely and sensitive topic in the context of our faith. Having said that, some of you may be uncomfortable or somewhat troubled by what I am about to say. I can tell you that as I sat down to prepare this that I was. If at any point in my talk you feel similarly, I would ask you to focus on what prompted those feelings. I found that working to understand what triggers my own emotions is simply another part of my own ongoing personal transformation. I hope that my talk might be similarly helpful to you. OK, with that said, let's get started.

It doesn't take a deep thinker to come to the conclusion that our country is in the midst of an extremely trying period in our history. We just selected new leaders in one of the most unusual and, in my view, and I think in the view of many of you, the ugliest election of our lifetime. Following this bruising presidential election, some Americans are afraid of the future. Others feel that the outcome of the election was necessary to disrupt business as usual. Agree

or disagree, significant portions of our population are anxious about our future. Many, I am guessing some in this room, feel that the results of the election suggest that our country may have lost its way, while just as many in this room may believe that with this election behind us our nation has finally found its footing. Many of us may have seen both of these perspectives in our own homes and in our own families over this past Thanksgiving holiday. I know that I did.

At this point in time, our country seems to find itself divided across the lines of racial, ethnic, religious and sexual identity. In the past few weeks, within our own community we have had a swastika painted in the playground at Ballard Park and some may have heard of nearby Wilton high school seniors chanting “Build that Wall” at a high school football game in Danbury; a game by the way which Wilton won 28 to nothing. Depending on one’s view of “the facts”, some have condemned this chanting as hate speech whereas others have defended this as a constitutionally protected expression of free speech.

Regardless of your view on the outcome of the election, I think that we all can agree that these are challenging times. The question that I would like to pose this morning to you is “What is our role as Catholic men, Catholic leaders, within our family, our community and our nation in these times?”

In my view, the most pressing challenge for our country is to work to build community and to develop a sense of common purpose among our people. As a Catholic man, I believe that sense of common purpose must be grounded in and consistent with the values of our faith as modeled by the life Jesus led.

What does that mean? First and foremost, respect for the dignity of each and every human being recognizing and accepting that each and every one of us has been born in the image and likeness of God. From the unborn to the elderly, the male or the female, straight, gay or transgender, the white, the brown, the yellow or the black skinned, the Catholic, the Protestant, the Mormon, the Jew, the Muslim, the atheist or the agnostic, the unemployed former coal miner in West Virginia, the laid off autoworker in Detroit, the one percenter from Greenwich, the immigrant from Guatemala or the refugee from Syria. All are equally God's children and we, as a society, must strive to listen to and be compassionate to each and to treat each with the respect that each deserves.

It is perhaps ironic, or maybe not, that this division in our country happens to be taking place at the end of this extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. We have talked quite a bit here at Men's Ministry over this past year about the intent of this special period and Pope Francis's message to all Catholics. In this past year, I believe Pope Francis was not simply calling me to be nicer to people but

calling on me to live mercy on a basis that transforms me. He challenged me, and all of us, not just to provide support to the marginalized, outcast and disenfranchised but to learn from them as well, to listen to them, to be with them. His challenge requires me, and again all of us, to do the hard work of developing a sympathetic understanding for the experiences and sensibilities of all of our fellow citizens. In our current environment, Pope Francis is calling each of us to be understanding to the needs of both the laid off Carrier factory worker from Indianapolis as well as the Mexican immigrant from Tijuana in real and meaningful ways. He is also not asking us to prioritize one over the other but to be compassionate, caring and understanding to both. Again, he is not asking us to just be a bit nicer or just to write more checks to charity; he is challenging us to intimacy with one another and with God. He goes on to ask us “to leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others”. Pope Francis is telling us to get out of our comfort zones. Christianity is not about living without risk. He is asking us to enter the chaos and the pain and the joy of others’ lives.

Three weeks ago today, Pope Francis, in a ceremony welcoming 17 new cardinals, reminded us again of this obligation as he denounced the tendency to treat “a stranger, an immigrant or a refugee as the enemy” warning that such

thinking invited hatred. “Little by little, our differences turn into symptoms of hostility, threats and violence,” he said. Rather, we should take counsel from the words of the author Audre Lorde who wrote “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” We should always remember that Jesus came to us as the stranger and the outcast, who we rejected. He asked us to see “his face” in the face of the stranger.

I submit that our job as Catholic men is to work to stay in relationship with others and to build new relationships with others in order to mend the divides within and between our families, our communities and our nation. We must try to do so by inspiring ourselves, our families, our communities and our nation to behave and govern in a manner that is consistent with our Catholic values. In order to do that, we must first, and as always with God’s help, work on ourselves so that we may be better able to understand the needs of others.

We must ask ourselves. What are ways in which I can better understand my fellow citizens? What qualities do they possess that I would admire? And what are fundamental things that we can work on together?

With respect to our elected officials, we must take the time and dedicate the effort to understand the specifics of their policy proposals and offer concrete amendments and alternatives that are consistent with our faith. As Catholic men, we must keenly focus on issues and proposed policies with respect to the dignity of life and on issues and proposed policies supporting respect, inclusion and equity for all. As Catholic men, we have an obligation to speak up and to lead in our families, our communities and in our nation now, as much as ever. Let us have the courage to speak the truth when necessary and finally let us remember that perhaps our greatest way to evangelize is to let the world know that we are Christians by our love.

Before we get to the questions, I understand that this week's discussion is one that can easily spiral out of control in our small groups into a discussion of politics. That is not the intent of this session. The challenge that I have tried to frame this morning is about our obligation as Catholic men to be able to listen to, be empathetic to and learn from others and to lead in a manner consistent with our faith. My hope is that we can all leave this room this morning thinking about what we each may need to change in ourselves in order to be able to do both more effectively. With that in mind, I'd ask table captains to please try to focus the table discussion along these lines.

Questions

- 1) How comfortable are you modeling the type of behavior articulated by Pope Francis during the recently concluded Jubilee of Mercy?
- 2) How do you demonstrate empathy with those that may feel fearful or threatened by the outcome of the election?
- 3) For those that may be concerned about the future of the country, how can Jesus's example provide direction or comfort?
- 4) How would you react if you were present with your family at the Danbury High School football game when a portion of the Wilton High School student body began chanting "Build that Wall"? What would you do if one of your children was involved in the chanting?
- 5) Pope Francis has emphasized the importance of bridge building in our community and throughout the world. What can we do to encourage and facilitate bridge building here in our community?