

*While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in the darkness, brothers and sisters, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night nor of the darkness. [1 Thessalonians 5: 3-5]*

Saint Paul frequently reminded the early Christians that they were to be always alert and ready for the Lord's return. When that second coming did not occur as soon as originally thought, the Christian community had to pay more attention to how they were living the present moment in anticipation of the coming Reign of God. They had to pay attention to the importance of right relationships with God and with each other and to order their lives by the values of God's kingdom.

Pope Francis used this text earlier in the week in his message for the annual World Day of Prayer for Peace, observed each January 1. His central message was that no one is saved alone, we are all in this together. And, as he reminds us rather beautifully in his letter *Fratelli Tutti*, we need to rediscover the bonds that connect us as a human family of sisters and brothers in order to survive.

While two years ago on this night there *were* hints and warnings of impending violence right here at the capitol, many of us could not believe that in the "land of the free and the home of the brave" the transition of executive power from one administration to the next would not be done in the usual peaceful way. We have since learned that our cherished democratic tradition of government of the people, by the people and for the people cannot be taken for granted. We must be vigilant and not caught off guard by those who work to undermine the right relationships necessary for democracy to flourish rather than decay into mob rule or the values of "might makes right".

It is well known that democracy was not the political system of choice for much of Christian history; no less a theologian than Saint Thomas Aquinas found it problematic. It was the American "proposition", especially as presented by the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray in discussions of religious freedom at the second Vatican Council, that allowed global Catholicism to eventually consider the democratic system as a legitimate way to pursue the common good and to promote the intrinsic worth and dignity of the human person in a pluralistic society. The formal endorsement of democratic forms of government comes most explicitly in John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus* which elaborates the importance of citizens

participating in political choices and the governed both electing and holding accountable those that govern them. [CA, 46].

The value of subsidiarity is likewise enshrined in the best practices of democracy. John Paul warned that without respect for the rule of law democracy cannot function in the service of the people and the common good. Corruption and secrecy undermine the values that make democracy productive. Like Saint Paul reminded the Thessalonians, we are to be children of light, not of darkness. Our presence tonight is to insist that we cannot allow these values to slip away because we are not vigilant nor to be taken away by those who would prefer to be under the dictatorship of one who shares their views rather than doing the hard work of creating a democratic consensus in which all voices matter. Pope Francis is not the first pope to suggest that political activity could and should be an expression of love. Pope Benedict XVI, whose funeral was celebrated today, spoke of the institutional mediation of the *polis* as no less practice of charity than direct service. (*Caritas in Veritate*, 7).

As we gather in vigil and prayer for the survival and flourishing of our democracy, Pope Francis' address for this new year is quite apt;

“We cannot ignore one fundamental fact, namely that the many moral, social, political and economic crises we are experiencing are all interconnected, and what we see as isolated problems are actually causes and effects of one another. Consequently, we are called to confront the challenges of our world in a spirit of responsibility and compassion. We must revisit the issue of ensuring public health for all. We must promote actions that enhance peace and put an end to the conflicts and wars that continue to spawn poverty and death. We urgently need to join in caring for our common home and in implementing clear and effective measures to combat climate change. We need to battle the virus of inequality and to ensure food and dignified labor for all, supporting those who lack even a minimum wage and find themselves in great difficulty. The scandal of entire peoples starving remains an open wound. We also need to develop suitable policies for welcoming and integrating migrants and those whom our societies discard. Only by responding generously to these situations, with an altruism inspired by God's infinite and merciful love, will we be able to build a new world and contribute to the extension of his kingdom, which is a kingdom of love, justice and peace.”

We are indeed sisters and brothers, we value the voices of all of our sisters and brothers and must seek ways to include the voiceless among us. The events in this place two years ago remind us that democracy requires the engagement of all people

and our faith reminds us that politics in the service of the common good is a noble expression of Gospel love.