

# For the cry of the Earth and the cry of the Poor

Hello, my name is Sean Gargamelli-McCreight, and I am a member of Benincasa Community, a lay catholic community founded in the tradition of religious life and the Catholic Worker movement in New York City in 2015 and now also based as an emerging eco-spiritual center in Guilford, CT. As a community of believers dedicated to the works of mercy and justice in our Church and world, the question of how to live out a faith that does justice is ever at the forefront of our hearts and minds. In our practice together, we attempt to listen to the sacred revelations found in creation and the life of Jesus.

In today's scripture from the gospel of John we read that at his suffering, Jesus considered heaven and said, "I don't pray for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all may be one." (John 17:20)

Dorothy Day writes about the striving for heaven as the "building of beloved community". A place within ourselves and around us where divisions cease and justice prevails.

When we read today that Jesus "looked to heaven", can we imagine him deeply regarding and remembering his beloved community? Reflecting on the lives and faces of the people he loved in his life and his ministry, "not servants but friends" (John 15:15): Mary his mother, Joseph his father, Mary Magdalene his protector and proclaimer, Peter his confidant and his rock, his followers, the forgotten, forlorn, forbidden and forsaken. All of them, a part of his definition of heaven. And yet, Jesus doesn't pray for them alone. As he cries out to God in pain, exclaiming his final words to those marginalized by the mainstream, suffering in solidarity with the oppressed, he prays for me too...for you, for the Romans and the Clerics, for our church leadership, the bishops and cardinals, for the privileged and powerful.

It's easy to forget that Jesus in his mission and ministry came to redeem the whole world, but was predominantly present and preaching to those deemed by the dominant culture to be the "poor" and wretched. He was teaching among the troubled and ministering to the mistreated. His comforting words and healing message were primarily directed to those ostracized and battered by the bastions of the mighty. And yet, today he has a special message for this dominating culture. We must listen.. Listen to those who have been pushed to the perimeter, oppressed and yet living in fullness despite how they might be characterized as downtrodden.

Pope Francis similarly invites us to listen, "to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor."

Listen.

FutureChurch seems to have gotten the message. We are after all here for a "listening session" in this synodal process. And yet, what might it be like for us to continue in this practice of listening and sharing? To listen to a child, a friend, a family member, or someone writing and speaking about the pain that our Church has inflicted upon them. Our reflections from this six

week process will be shared with our bishops, cardinals, and representatives from the Vatican. Let's also ensure they receive our message in the weeks, months, and years to come. Continue to ask your bishop or cardinal to listen to you.

Let's remember Jesus teaches us that reform always happens from the bottom up not the top down (Matthew 20:16), and we will even initially be reviled by those in power for our pursuit of justice and reform (John 15:18). But alas, the good news is Jesus promises those of us with a vigorous faith, that our grief will turn to rejoicing (John 16:16).

Many people here today know there is nothing quite as exhilarating as a group of "cradle catholics" showing up with signs, prayer, and song outside of your local cathedral or bishop's mansion or even St. Peter's Square insisting that church leadership listen to our concerns about increased support for refugees, survivors of clerical abuse, women's ordination, the lives of LGBTQ people, and an end to what Dr. Martin Luther King identified as the "triplets of evil" in America, racism, militarism, and unfettered capitalism. We can insist the United States Conference of Bishops listen to us on these issues.

Afterall, for a myriad of reasons, we are still here, still a part of the catholic tradition in one form or another. Either for ourselves or for others, we have an obligation to listen and to be heard in this movement for reform. To send the message that people are not leaving the Church in droves because of a "secularization of society", but rather because church leadership refuses to evolve with the faithful people.

We are not here to incriminate practices of faith from centuries past, for it is certainly the faith of our parents and grandparents and ancestors upon which we build today. The rituals, the devotions, the prayers are all the bedrock upon which we can strengthen the beloved community. And yet, Catholicism has changed and evolved throughout the centuries, and therefore in this growth we have become more Catholic, more universal, more whole, because people and communities on the ground have modeled what a more expansive, inclusive, and dare I say joyful faith can be. From the Cluniac Reforms to Vatican II, the Church does change. However difficult and hopeless it can feel at times, we are right in the middle of one such major shift in our tradition.

For many of us making our voices heard will mean demonstrating in front of these palaces of power. However, we know money talks too. So in this year's Diocesan or Cardinal appeal consider writing a letter and sending it to your parish priest, bishop or cardinal. Then, tell them instead of including money in your envelope you are making a donation to an organization working to support the rights of women, lgbtq people, indigenous groups, poc and black led movements, because you believe in the separation of Church and State and don't want your donation included in the many millions of dollars they spend on the church's lobbying arm to strike down public legislation protecting the rights of women, and victim survivors, and LGBTQ people. Then if you feel like they're still not listening to your concerns, bring a group back to their doorstep, and this time invite the media.

After several such actions in which members of our community and its supporters held vigils outside diocesan spaces advocating for sanctuary in catholic churches, in 2018 Benincasa was called upon to stand on the front steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral with victim survivors of clerical sex abuse in support of the Child Victims Act which the Archdiocese was vigorously opposing as it would significantly expand the "look-back window" and statute of limitations for individuals attempting to file suit against their perpetrators. During this outdoor liturgy, with yellow cabs weaving through traffic lanes and tourists meandering with arms full of shopping bags, we invited people to bring a favorite image or icon of Mary and together we prayed to Our Mother, with rosary beads in hand, for healing and intercession and the passage of this monumental law and an end to the Church's opposition.

I'll be honest, I don't imagine Cardinal Dolan pays any attention to us when we show up at St. Pat's on 5th Avenue, but people passing by certainly do and their reactions of love are all anyone really needs to keep vigiling for inclusion.

So to be Catholic, in public and in private, is to listen and to learn: to be in pursuit of making things whole, creating circles of community rather than pillars of power, what Jesus calls "a house with many rooms" (John 14:2). We're not universal in the sense that to be Catholic is the only way to encounter the divine, rather to be Catholic means to maintain a deeper presence to and acute awareness of the innumerable ways in which God is revealed through the vast diversity of Creation, diversity of faith, diversity of people and culture. To limit or diminish any sacred part of this creation is antithetical to a message grounded in love and listening. To this end, since our founding in 2015, it has been essential for us also to open our home to those in need with what Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day called "christrooms." Temporary, supportive housing grounded foremost in community for folks who are facing housing insecurity, domestic violence, newly arrived immigrants, students, artists, and international activists. Along the way, we listen to each other and try to learn what makes every individual feel whole.

For each of us here today, this very catholic practice of "making things more whole" will take on many different forms, person to person and at various points in our lives. It is in this sacred variety divinity dwells. The question for all of us then becomes, how do we open our hearts to receive this unifying message and to share the message with the powerful, even when it makes us uncomfortable? How might we know when faith and justice are coming to fruition in our Church? One way of knowing is certainly when American bishops and cardinals are feeling challenged by the social conscience of the laity, but we might also know when we sense the fullness of the Holy Spirit within ourselves, that gift Jesus offered us in his death and resurrection.

Unlike many of our Protestant brothers and sisters, as Catholics we are often conditioned from a young age to be passive recipients of faith not active participants. We are told we "receive" the sacraments, receive the body of Christ, receive reconciliation, receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit during confirmation, rather than being reminded that in every moment as an ecclesial body we're renewing our baptismal rights as "priests, prophets, and kings."

By virtue of Jesus' life of inclusion, we are a part of a much more participative faith tradition than we are led to believe, and in this moment we are called to remind power that they too must listen. Like Jesus, let's pray to our God that they, and that we, might listen and therefore know Jesus and know our creator more deeply.

Thank you, and much peace to you and your loved ones on this blessed day.

Possible questions for reflection

- How might we know when faith and justice are coming to fruition in our Church?
- In what ways have you encountered "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor"?
- How do you understand the question of heaven, beloved community, a house with many rooms? What issues are standing in the way of realizing this dream? What needs to happen in order to get closer to this ideal?
- What does a faith that does justice mean to you? How important is it for faith and public life to intersect?