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Vatican's justice and peace head meets with U.S. social action leaders

Jerry Filteau | Feb. 15, 2011

Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Turkson, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, speaks Feb. 13 during the 2011 annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington. (CNS photos/Bob Roller)

WASHINGTON ? Addressing more than 300 U.S. Catholic social justice leaders, the Vatican?s Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson urged them to keep their focus on building a just society ?at a time of great financial difficulty not only for the United States but for the world.?

In working for justice ?we are the reflections of the living body of Christ,? he said.

Turkson, former archbishop of Cape Coast, Ghana, and now president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, is in Washington for the 2011 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, which has drawn more than 300 participants from dioceses and other Catholic organizations across the country.

In his keynote address he focused on the 120th anniversary to the first papal social encyclical, Leo XIII?s 1891 letter *Rerum Novarum*, on the condition of labor, and the legacy of Catholic social teaching that has grown since then.

?We of the Catholic societies and Catholic social ministries, the promoters of reconciliation, justice and peace in the name of the church, are the heirs, the inheritors of this tradition,? he said. ?In our various efforts we still continue to contribute to the writing of the book of the church?s social doctrine.?

?A very significant way of tracing out that legacy is in what you are doing,? he added. ?You are part of the products of the 120 years of reflection and action which were formulated in *Rerum Novarum*. You are part of this living legacy, you are part of the evolution of the work for justice through the past 120 years.?

He said Pope Leo himself ?considered the involvement of Catholics in social matters critical for the formulation of his own encyclical? and lay Catholic participation remains central to the church?s social teaching today, as it was then.

The encyclical itself evolved from Catholic statements and activities that had been emerging in the previous decades in various parts of Europe and in the United States, he said.

?This history provides us with a glimpse of how renewal in the church is often anticipated by the concrete actions of faithful and groups within the church, which anticipated eventual official positions that the church would describe,? he said.

He quoted from the encyclical: ?Those Catholics are worthy of our praise -- and they are not few -- who, understanding what the times require, have striven by various undertakings and endeavors to better the conditions of the working class by rightful means. They have taken up the cause of the working masses and have spared no effort to better the conditions both of families and of individuals, to infuse a spirit of equity into the mutual relations of employers and employed, to keep before the eyes of both classes the precepts of duty and the laws of the Gospel.?

The encyclical still speaks to Catholics engaged in social ministry today, the cardinal said. ?We are involved in the legacy when, in our creativity and innovativeness, we also provide new trajectories and challenging forms of social ministry to the institutional church ? which are the considerations emerging from our undertakings and endeavors to better the conditions of people when we are engaged in the struggles for a faith that does justice,? he said.

He praised the U.S. Catholic history of contributions to social ministry, citing as examples Jesuit Fr. John Lafarge?s pioneering work on racial justice and Jesuit Fr. John Courtney?s work on improving education and on religious freedom.

The U.S. bishops, he said, laid the foundations for the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace during the Second Vatican Council with amendments they introduced to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, he said.

U.S. Catholic laity have ?significantly contributed to action in order to address so very many justice issues, and we need to acknowledge the profound effect of this dialogical approach, which has asserted such a powerful institutional impact,? he said. ?This two-way dialogue of reflection and action made a significant impact on the world and squarely placed the Catholic Church at the center of social change.?

?As church we have a lot to be proud of,? he added. ?And you, as citizens of the United States, must be

particularly proud of this. We must renew our commitment to this approach in the promotion of social change.?

Turkson was chief celebrant of the liturgy that followed his address.

The homilist, Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the U.S. bishops? Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, reflected on the Gospel passage where Jesus tells his followers to be unwaveringly faithful, to let their ?yes? mean ?yes? and their ?no? mean ?no.?

?No to the forces of evil,? he said. ?No to injustice. No to poverty. No to greed. No to oppression. No to exploitation. No to human degradation.?

?But yes,? he went on, ?to the forces of good. Yes to life. Yes to justice. Yes to human dignity and the common good. Yes to generosity in the preferential option for the poor. Yes to freedom. Yes to human rights. Yes to the centrality of the human person. Yes to Jesus Christ.?

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

NCR is covering the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington this week. For short updates throughout the day, be sure to check out Michael Sean Winters' blog **Distinctly Catholic [1].** For more lengthy reports, see our continuing story coverage:

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