**LET US DREAM: The Path to a Better Future**

*Decenter and Transcend: A Priesthood for the Healing of our Church and World*

Thank you for the kind introduction Sr. Jackie. I am sincerely grateful for the invitation to join you these days. Thank you to AUSCP's leadership and all those whose hands came together to organize this gathering. Thank you to Sr. Michelle for the prayers we so needed today.

I am honored today to lead NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, founded by Catholic Sisters 50 years ago in the Spirit of Vatican II. NETWORK is an organization that has rarely if ever been accused of suffering from the malady of Holy Spirit Atheism (as Dan framed yesterday). Thank you AUSCP for previously honoring my predecessor, Sr. Simone Campbell, and by so doing, honoring all of the women religious whose legacy of cooperating with the Spirit of Vatican II we at NETWORK today live out of as we engage the sometimes treacherous terrains on Capitol Hill. It is so good to witness AUSCP honoring Sr. Jeannine Gramick, another Sister who has modeled the virtue of courage so essential to our Church today.

My gratitude to Dan for the land acknowledgement yesterday, and to Bishop John and Dan for masterfully laying the theological grounding for what I will be offering you today. While we did not directly collaborate, I think you will see that we did cooperate with the Holy Spirit as we each prepared for our time with you because of the deep resonances I hope you will see. Finally, Cardinal Turkson, we are looking forward to your plenary this afternoon. Thank you for your leadership in this time of real opportunity in our Church.

As I am deeply Ignatian animated and formed, I want to name that I am pivoting from the Franciscan perspective of Monday night and Tuesday to the other one out of which our Pope Francis proceeds. And so, I must begin with Jesus . . .

Appearing to the apostles in the Upper Room, our Risen Christ says "Peace be with You" and proceeds to model reconciliation in all of his encounters – from the encounter on the road to Emmaus, to that with Peter by the sea. In these post-resurrection stories, Jesus leads with listening, deep listening. This listening and reconciling is what Jesus models before he sends his disciples out, before he missions them. The Church continues this work of Christ's peace and reconciliation in the world today.

This morning, I am going to offer an approach to you my brother priests for thinking about, and living more fully into, this mission of Christ today. I will start by exploring peacebuilding as the Church's vocation and the need to live into that

vocation in the U.S. today. I will then touch on how the synodal process has been preparing us as a Church for this mission of peacebuilding and then frame how your role as priest is critical to this vocation through some examples of peacebuilding in our Church lived out through restorative justice practices both here and abroad.

This plenary is directed specifically to those of you in the room who are priests because of your specific role in our Church. My invitation to your sisters and friends in the room is to listen to what I have missed and please add it in your small groups and when we regather for a larger conversation.

**Peacebuilding as the Church's Vocation**

Peacebuilding is the Church's vocation. The audacious claim was heard a decade ago when scholar practitioners gathered in Rome and identified peacebuilding as an imperative for Catholic Christians. At the time, the late Fr. Robert Schreiter, Missionary of the Precious Blood and CTU professor explained peacebuilding "is more than something the Church *can* do" because of its global reach and ubiquitous presence in many areas of conflict. "It is something the Church *must* do if it is to be faithful to its Lord, . . . an utter requirement for our participation in God's reconciling action in the world."

These claims arose out of the work of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, a network formed in 2004 through the cooperation of Catholic Relief Services and the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at University of Notre Dame. Today, the CPN – which is having their own conference as we speak -- includes over 20 affiliated Catholic institutions and does capacity building in three areas with long-standing conflicts where the Church is a key agent for peace: the Great Lakes Region of Africa, Mindanao in the Philippines, and Colombia. The CPN promotes distinctively Catholic capacity building by establishing peacebuilding teams; providing training and best practice sharing for local peacebuilding agents and institutions; and informing scholarly and educational resource based on the learnings from the ground.

I had the opportunity to see this Catholic peacebuilding in action when I traveled with the Jesuits to Colombia at the height of that country's conflict, a time when it generated the world's second-largest population of internally displaced persons (IDPs). We traveled there from what is now Jesuits West Province as part of its twinning agreement of mutual collaboration and support with the Colombian Province. While in country, our delegation experienced the gathering of all of the Colombian Jesuits in Bogota to build capacity for peace.

That trip expanded exponentially my imagination for what the Church can do when it understands peacebuilding as its vocation. And fast forward to 2016, the peace plan's signing and ultimate approval by the Colombian legislature in

November. Direct correlation? I cannot make that claim, but what I can say it that the Catholic Church in Colombia was part of what peacebuilding scholar and practitioner, John Paul Lederach, calls the "social echo" of peacebuilding critical to capacity building for peace.

Years later, I witnessed Catholic peacebuilding in action again when I lived in Kenya with the Maryknoll Sisters peacebuilding team, a cross-cultural team serving in the upper Rift Valley using restorative justice-like practices to create the conditions for healing following the post-election violence. I will return to this experience in Kenya a bit later.

Before I go on, let me briefly define peacebuilding for our purposes today which I draw from Dr. Lisa Schirch who is now the Richard G. Starmann Sr. Professor of Practice at Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies (*Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding)*: Peacebuilding is an umbrella concept to include many fields of activity that contribute to just and peaceful societies. The ultimate goal is a just and peaceful society in which conflicts that naturally occur are handled in a healthy way.

Dr. Lisa Schirch explains (*Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding)*:

> Peacebuilding supports the development of relationship at all levels of society: between individuals and within families; communities; organizations; businesses, governments; and cultural, religious, economic, and political institutions and movements. Relationships are a form of power or *social capital*. When people connect and form relationships, they are more likely to cooperate together to constructively address conflict.

She goes on to explain:

> Peace does not just happen. It is built when people take great care in their decision-making to plan for the long term, anticipating potential problems, engaging in ongoing analysis of the conflict and local context, and coordinating different actors and activities in all stages of conflict and at all levels of society.

So what does this have to do with you, members of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priest?

In short, because while the Catholic Church in the U.S. so often views peacebuilding as being needed in the countries like the Philippines, Colombia and certain places in Africa, it does not come to mind as generally needed here in the U.S. I would like to make the case that peacebuilding is in fact needed right here at home.

**Why Peacebuilding is Needed in the U.S.**

Last January, my faith and public life colleagues in Washington held their annual retreat and invited Dr. Rachel Kleinfeld, Senior Fellow for the Democracy, Conflict and Governance Program at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. I have since read many of her sources. Her analysis and those sources are compelling and if you will bear with me for a few minutes, I would like to summarize what she shared with us.

Dr. Kleinfeld started by clarifying that while we in the U.S. often credit ourselves with being the oldest democracy in the world, we in fact started as a fairly limited democracy – we did not incorporate our black community. Their franchise was removed through violence backed by the ballet. "Eleven of our states were what comparative scholars call 'authoritarian enclaves' where one party rule was upheld with vigilante violence sanctioned by the state."

Dr. Kleinfeld went on to explain that "we have only tried to be an inclusive democracy for 60 years. That puts us at the same level as the 'second wave' – the countries that became democracies with decolonization." Thus, while our institutions are older, "our figuring out how we govern a multiethnic democracy where one group is not de jure OR de facto on top is still pretty new.

With the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, we really began our inclusive democracy and that is precisely when the political parties started sorting racially and that sorting has continued. "What this means is that we now have one party that is more homogenous, and one that is extremely diverse. Extremely diverse makes it hard to pull together a coalition for anything, and a lot of appealing to identities. Homogenous means easier to appeal to one identity than to policies . .."

Kleinfeld goes on to explain -- "We see this in other countries – when identity starts to align with party, it increases chances of political instability. When more than one identity marker lines up, it actually increases chances of civil war by 12 times. And that is what we now have in the US. Parties are sorted racially, but also by geography, rural vs. urban, religion – and a host of other things."

That kind of sorting is not necessarily pernicious, Kleinfled explains. There are many reasons people like to be with folks like themselves. "But in aggregate, it polarizes, and politics doubles down by appealing to that polarization." What we then see in cross-cutting institutions is that they decline or become sorted too. Cross-cutting institutions include churches, unions, Kiwanis clubs . … So fewer places we meet others not like ourselves.

This has led to what Dr. Jennifer McCoy calls pernicious polarization based on 100 years of data . . . the U.S. is among the more polarized countries in the world – no other liberal democracy approaches our perniciousness – such "intense

polarization for such an extended period." Dr. Kleinfeld was clear with us in January that these conditions create the "incentives of partisans" to "dismantle democracy itself to win."

In 1965, we erected legal barriers to end those incentives but in 2013, the "Supreme Court removed Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, and within 24 hours, Texas announced strict photo ID, voter purges for failure to vote in recent elections, voter role 'clean ups' if you moved across town, etc."

In short, they and many others who are trained to see and understand democracies and civil wars across the globe, who study the data on civil wars, were not surprised by what happened on January 6th (Washington Post, March 8, 2022). They agree that we, the United States, have high risk factors for civil war or significant harm to our democracy.

Kleinfeld explained to us in January that "Democracies globally have been degrading for 15 years, and the United States was on one of the fastest downward trajectories in recent years according to Freedom House . . . The Economist Intelligence Unit has also downgraded the US to a flawed democracy a few years ago, and it keeps dropping." (Kleinfeld, notes 3)

She went on to explain that "Globally, four factors really elevate risk of election violence: competitive elections that decide balance of power, parties divided by identity, election rules that allow you to win by calling on identity because of how districts are drawn, and a security sector that leans to one side." In short, we in the U.S. have all of that present according to democracy scholars who are very, very alarmed.

Dr. Kleinfeld went on to share with us the polling regarding justifiable use of violence and fear increasing, the upward trend of actual violence against public officials, the rising politicization and extremism of law enforcement and military (1 in 10 rioters January 6 had service backgrounds) and the skyrocketing of new gun sales. As to the rise in the U.S. of criminal violence, she explained that historically, it is affected by the political tone and spirit -- for 200 years the homicide rate has closely correlated with trust in government and fellow Americans. "So it should not have been a surprise that last year saw a historic, 30% rise in homicide when no other country in world saw an uptick. And a homicide clearance rate that fell to 50% - with the largest one year decline in over 20 years. When people don't see justice from the state, they often seek it themselves."

As we are in the midst of the January 6th hearings, and all the violence of the past few months, I hope we can all agree that these democracy scholars are saying things to which we need to pay attention.

So what to do?

Dr. Kleinfeld gave suggestions for electoral reform and other details for those of us working on Capitol Hill, and she made a compelling case for the Churches to really lead the way right now – changing norms and saying NO to violence of any type. We need churches coming together, no matter what their orthodoxies, and speaking loudly against violence. She also called for the subordination of politics BELOW religion, rather than making power into a religion.

Before I move to what this means for us in the Catholic Church, I want to share what Dr. Kleinfeld said at the end: **"Finally, we need to get out of our bubbles and build understanding**. Social media. Media really, not just social. And not just media – it's the bubble we all inhabit. According to all sorts of scholarship, the people who are most inaccurate in their view of the other party are politically active, highly educated people on the left." Let me say that again.

Kleinfeld left us with this: "Hope, family, connection: A country rent by dissension must see, feel, and touch how it might come together. Families pulled apart by politics, conspiracy, disagreements over Covid, must find a way back to one another. Social fabric must be darned and re-sewn in a stronger tapestry."

**Exploring What is Possible for the Role of Priest in a U.S. Church that Embraces the Peacebuilding Vocation**

While the U.S. Catholic Church is in decline as we all know, it is still the largest single church in the country (when Protestantism is divided into separate denominations). And, it is still a cross-cutting institution: we are in rural and urban areas in every state; in many Catholic churches, we can find Republicans and Democrats under the same roof. In many Catholic churches, we can find people of all races and identities under the same roof. These are the kinds of places where peacebuilding can happen, where we can create the conditions for building the understanding we know we need to turn away from the downward spiral I have just laid out. (Some significant racial sorting has occurred, especially in urban areas, and if you are in one of those, we can talk during Q&A how to approach that situation.)

What is more, the Catholic Church world-wide has structures and organizations that already are building best practices (I mentioned Catholic Peacebuilding Network) and a hierarchy in our Church that makes it possible to invite and engage the entire world in such processes. Before I go on to frame an invitation to you to ponder your own role as a priest in the U.S. Church that embraces the peacebuilding vocation, I will share with you a brief story. In the wake of the U.S.'s response to 9/11 and the U.S. Catholic Church's impoverished response relying on our just war theory, I found myself seeking out other tradition's responses. My colleague at Santa Clara University, the moral theologian Bill Spohn, handed me an essay "The Challenge of Terror: A Traveling Essay" by John

Paul Lederach, the Mennonite peacebuilding practitioner-scholar who helped found the EMU peacebuilding program and was then brought to the Kroc Institute at Notre Dame to help us Catholics figure out how to do this thing called Catholic Peacebuilding. That essay moved me so deeply that when I took a study leave from Santa Clara a few years later, I went to EMU to study peacebuilding. And there, Mennonite after Mennonite spoke about their envy of the Catholic Church's structures and universal reach for purposes of peacebuilding: gathering spaces, teaching the practices, the approach, the frameworks, etc.

As I have watched the synod process unfold, I have often thought about that insight from our Mennonite siblings.

**Synodality as Preparing the Way**

You all know about Pope Francis' Synod on Synodality ("Synod 2021-2023: For a Synodal Church") and, it is my hope many of you have had a direct experience of it. In his 2020 book after which this conference is named, *LET US DREAM: The Path To A Better Future*, Pope Francis addressed the upcoming synod, saying "[s]ynodality starts with hearing from the whole People of God. A Church that teaches must be firstly a Church that listens" (p. 84).

Here is a wonderful description of the synod by Dr. Brian Flanagan who is an ecclesiologist and president of the College Theology Society:

> Synodality is about the church that gathers together around the Eucharistic table to make Christ present in sacrament gathering together around the table of discernment to make Christ present in our decision-making processes. We talk about "celebrating" a synod rather than just having a synod, because in both instances we are not just meeting together of our volition, but meeting together through the power of the Holy Spirit to help make Christ's presence more visible and effective. Rather than a meeting that happens to have some prayer at the beginning and end, synods are meetings as prayer, and synodality privileges all of the values of dialogue, mutual listening and respect, and consensus-building that signal the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

In explaining the synod process, Pope Francis clearly points out that the "traditional truths of the Christian doctrine" are not under discussion, **but rather** how that teaching can be "lived and applied in the changing contexts of our time" (p.85). He uses the Synod on Amazonia in 2019 as an example, explaining that if you saw it as about the issue of ordaining married men, you missed where the Spirit took those who gathered to engage the challenges facing the region and its peoples. Those daunting challenges included the "destruction of the rainforest, the murders of indigenous leaders, the marginalization of the indigenous, and the difficulties facing the Church in the region." He goes on to say that "in reality, the

synod was a breakthrough in many ways: it gave us a clear mission and vision to stand with the native peoples, the poor, and the land; and to defend culture and creation against the powerful forces of death and destruction driven soley by profit. AND, "[i]t laid the basis for a Church in Amozonia that is deeply embedded in local culture, and with a strong presence of active laypeople; and it set in motion processes such as the creation of the Amazonian bishops' conference. But little of this progress was reported." (89-90)

In that short but important book, I heard Pope Francis calling us to live our vocation as peacebuilders. To live this, both individually and institutionally, we need a particular kind of disposition, one that Pope Francis names at the end of *LET US DREAM*. In the Epilogue, he poses these questions: "And now what must I do? What could be my place in the future, and what can I do to make it possible?" To these questions, Pope Francis says two words: "decenter" and "transcend." He goes on: "see where you are centered and decenter yourself. The task is to open doors and windows, and move out beyond." (repeat)

Opening doors and windows, moving out beyond . . . let me leave you with a few examples if just this kind of disposition.

**Peacebuilding in Action**

Example #1

In 2007 and into 2008, parts of Kenya erupted in post-election violence that played out generally along tribal lines due to many factors we do not have time to go into here. Roman Catholic Priests and religious participated in the violence and the common faith tradition was not determinative as to who a person would or would not exercise violence against – the lines were tribal.

After some extensive reconnaissance and ground laying work, a cross-cultural team of Maryknoll sisters – all trained in peacebuilding practices at EMU, including restorative justice practices, trauma & resilience, and working with traumatized communities -- began doing circle processes with community members starting in the Rift Valley, one area where the violence was significant. As I mentioned previously, I was privileged to witness part of this years-long sacred process, which, echoing Flanagan's description of the synodal process, were "meetings as prayer."

To address the deep trauma in the individuals and community, the process the sisters designed took place over a 6-month period, with homework for the participants in the intervening time, and the groups were comprised of folks from various tribes, sometimes the groups shared the same religious tradition, and sometimes the groups included folks from across religious traditions.

I interviewed a number of the priests who participated in one 6-month circle process together and the results were remarkable, more than what I have time to report here; one concrete action that followed is that they were rebuilding the destroyed houses together in their villages and rebuilding community life on the other side of these processes.

The priests said over and over again in their post-six-month process interview just how important simply sitting in a circle was for them, having never experienced Church in that way before. We could unpack that alone for days, but let me just say context matters.

These Sisters had a deep understanding of trauma and how it impacts individuals and communities. They were therefore able to adapt their processes after coming to understand how this specific trauma had impacted these specific individuals and communities.

Example #2

Now let me turn to the experience of the Archdiocese of St. Paul & Minneapolis who, as you may remember, over a very short period experienced the resignation of their Archbishop, bankruptcy and a corporate criminal indictment with an accompanying civil suit, all due to grave failures of the Archdiocese to protect children from abusing priests. As part of the settlement with the Ramsey County Attorney, John Choi, sought a culture change in the ASPM by creatively including a restorative justice provision in the final settlement agreement signed by both the parties. "This inclusion was an important development in the emerging culture change and restoration of the archdiocese. It exposed archdiocesan leaders, like Archbishop Bernard Hebda, to the positive potential of RJ to help heal the direct and peripheral harm of clergy abuse experienced, respectively, by victim survivors and Catholic in the ASPM." (Reason and Faith, p. 14)

What has been heartening for me to watch is how the ASPM went well beyond what the Ramsey County Attorney required; they have integrated restorative justice and its processes in and through all of its response to the harm of clergy abuse, leadership failures and peripheral harm. Today, ASPM leaders are being contacted by folks all over the country due to positive stories coming out of this time of crisis.

Fr. Dan Griffith from the ASPM, who was appointed Liaison for RJ and Healing by Archbishop Hebda, recently shared this about the "social echo" of these peacebuilding processes:

> In January of 2020, I began a four month sabbatical to delve more deeply into restorative justice. I was happily situated on a remote ranch in the Hill Country of South Texas. While most of my sabbatical entailed prayer, research, reading, and some writing, a group of colleagues and I were

invited to lead a restorative justice process in Wheeling West Virginia, a diocese that had become a “ground zero” location, as its former bishop had been accused of a trifecta of misconduct: abuse of seminarians, financial malfeasance, and corruption - much of which was exposed through detailed reporting in the Washington Post.

I could think of many reasons why I could stay in my peaceful and warm South Texas abode and not travel to West Virginia in late February. I chose to make the trip for two reasons - because I witnessed the effectiveness of restorative justice in response to the harm of clergy abuse in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis and because restorative justice is not primarily about reading and research but is about entering in - into the wound - into the pain and trauma to accompany others as they seek healing wholeness.

We arrived in Wheeling, WV via the Pittsburgh airport and the weather was foul. We had planned for a two day process - evening talks and healing circles followed by a similar process the next day, which would also include a victim-survivor testimonial. The weather worsened as the evening came and I assumed that we would have a modest turnout. I was moved as the people kept coming - despite the adverse conditions. They were coming because they needed to be heard - they needed justice and healing. To a full room, we spoke about the power of restorative justice to name harm and to foster accountability and healing.

One man memorably said about the former bishop, in a voice that conveyed both anger and dismay - “they knew that it was no saint they were sending here from Washington D.C. - they knew.” What added to the power of that evening was the fact that it was also Ash Wednesday - many of the folks attending wore pronounced crosses on their foreheads. Among those present for the restorative justice process, were mothers of seminarians whose sons had accused the former bishop of abuse and misconduct. One mother texted her son during the evening, wishing he was there and hoping he could experience healing. Another mother said in response to the evening, “we finally have hope.”

In reflecting on this powerful experience in West Virginia and having celebrated twenty years of priesthood last month, two things come powerfully home to me: the consistent effectiveness of restorative justice to help heal pain and trauma - to provide hope amidst suffering and how close this work is to Christ and the essence of his Gospel.

I was in West Virginia for most of these events which included Congregation of St. Joseph Sisters, leaders from Catholic Charities and the diocese. I can truly attest to the powerful impact they had on those who gathered AND the work continues.

Let me close by sharing what Fr. Dan has shared with me about how this work of restorative justice has changed him. He shared with me that in and through this call within a call – by entering into the crucible, the harm -- he has grown the most in his priesthood. When "we as priests deeply listen," he said, we grow, getting ourselves "out of the center." With this "self-emptying, spiritual freedom, humility," also comes "courage and boldness;" you "experience the transcendence . . . the divine," he said. For Dan, this has meant that he has discerned a call within a call, seeing how critical and integral the work of justice, healing and restoration is to the life and mission of the Church.

So back to Pope Francis' questions: what must you do? What could be your place in the future, and what can you do to make it possible?

Decenter and transcend. See where you are centered and decenter yourself. The task is to open doors and windows, and move out beyond.