

Welcome. Protect. Promote. Integrate.

Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday

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Holy Thursday

In his letter for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2018, Pope Francis gave us a roadmap on how to build community among diverse populations. He did so by calling to mind 4 verbs: welcome, protect, promote, and integrate. The ordering of the verbs is important. Over the course of the next few days for the 2026 Triduum and Easter, I will focus on each of these verbs, connecting them to these holiest days of the Church calendar and our parish mission. Tonight, Holy Thursday, will be to welcome, Good Friday will be to protect, Holy Saturday will be to promote, and Easter Sunday will be to integrate. You may be able to see where this is going already.

To welcome migrants and refugees, according to Pope Francis, means “offering broader options for [them] to enter destination countries safely and legally.” Applying this on the broader scale of building community and to our parish mission, to welcome means to make entry into the community as available and accessible as possible. Of course, we must have policies, protocols, and limits in order to function, but they should never be biased against newcomers. As Pope Francis constantly preached, any country or community that closes in on itself and only wants

to take care of its own is bound one day to be trapped in the very walls they themselves have created. It may look like the smart thing to do today, but it does so at the expense of our future.

As Catholics at St. Josephine Bakhita Parish & School, our welcoming takes place at every liturgy, which is why we now greet those around us before the entrance procession. Our masses are public events open to all. We do not know in advance who will be here or why they are coming. We set the Eucharistic Table knowing that Christ is the one who invites each one of us. As I shared in our 'Liturgies at Bakhita' document last Advent, our very first principle is "Christ deeply desires to celebrate the Eucharist with us. We are the ones invited, not the ones creating the guest list." This invitation takes its strongest form tonight, the evening that as one Gospel puts it, Christ 'eagerly desired' to eat the Passover with his disciples before he suffered.' (Lk. 22:15)

Another key element of welcoming for us, alongside liturgy, is in the way we serve others. It is interesting that at the Last Supper according to John's Gospel, which we heard this evening, there is no mention of bread and wine. What Jesus is presented with is a basin and a towel. With them, he washed the feet of his disciples and told them to do likewise. This is why we now present a basin and towel each weekend mass along with the gifts of bread and wine. It is a reminder of John's version of the Last Supper. Whenever we bend down to take care of others in humble service,

we become the body and blood of Christ poured out for the life of the world. Liturgy and service are therefore our best ways of welcoming and our best forms of evangelization. We preach by our actions and worship, not by words, dogmas, or threatening people with eternal punishment. That isn't welcoming.

Returning to his message for migrants and refugees, Pope Francis continues, "collective and arbitrary expulsions of migrants and refugees are not suitable solutions... we must strive to find alternative solutions to detain those who enter a country without authorization." Applying this on the broader scale of building community and our parish mission, we must be careful about pushing people away for not fitting in or complying with what we want. In a church that welcomes, we do not judge those we deem unworthy. We seek solutions built on dialogue, widening our tent, and learning from each other. The only document required is a heart open to love. Whatever we do and how we do it must always honor basic human dignity, even when we have to make challenging decisions about the well-being of the community.

We are a welcoming community of faith.

What are some of the indicators for me of a welcoming community? What are some of the challenges we must be willing to deal with if we call ourselves welcoming?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that we may grow in our ability to welcome. This is the essential foundation and first step of building community, especially in a diverse immigrant parish like our own. This is not the only step and there will be much more to follow, but without it, nothing else will matter. May each of us gathered here this evening know that Christ welcomes us and deeply desires to eat this Passover with us.

Good Friday

In his letter for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2018, Pope Francis gave us a roadmap on how to build community among diverse populations. He did so by calling to mind 4 verbs: welcome, protect, promote, and integrate. The ordering of the verbs is important. Last night, we talked about to welcome, especially in connection to Liturgy and Service. Tonight we will talk about the verb to protect. Tomorrow night we will talk about to promote, and Easter Sunday to integrate.

Pope Francis writes, "the second verb - protecting - may be understood as a series of steps intended to defend the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees." At first glance, we might not understand the importance of this step of protecting and may want to jump right into promoting or integrating. We must understand, however, that vulnerable populations like migrants and refugees are just that, vulnerable. Unlike many of us with

safety nets under us, migrants and refugees don't have safety nets under them. One minor incident can result in significant problems.

Applying this to building community and our parish mission, protecting the vulnerable among us is essential. Some might object that by doing this we are showing favoritism. A few may even call it reverse discrimination. In reality, however, it is not showing favoritism or reverse discrimination, but simply stopping the infliction of pain. It is protecting those who need someone to stand up for them, someone to be in their corner, or someone to speak when their voice is too faint to hear.

As we listened to the Good Friday Passion Gospel according to John today, it is clear that Jesus Christ himself could have used some protection. Instead, one disciple, Judas Iscariot, betrayed him and another, Peter, denied him. Because he was unable to defend himself against the power of Pilate, the religious leaders, and the crowds, Jesus truly was, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "like a lamb being led to the slaughter." He was vulnerable and in pain. The crucifixion, for as much as we want it to be an event in the past, is ongoing in our world today. The Christ continues to be crucified in the economic poor, the civilians caught up in war, the hungry and thirsty, the life in the womb considered as nothing more than an inconvenience, the inmate on death row, or the minorities who are uncertain about what rights they actually do have. As a Church, we cannot just expect the vulnerable to protect

themselves, especially when they are in pain. To protect them, we must step forward and be willing to carry some of their pain ourselves, just like Simon of Cyrene, the women of Jerusalem, Mary, and Veronica did for Jesus on his way of the cross.

Returning to Pope Francis' letter, he also notes one of the most vulnerable categories of people in the migrant and refugee communities: children. Migrant children are young, impressionable, and need to make a huge change when moving to a different region or part of the world. The pope writes, "the International Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a universal legal basis for the protection of underage migrants. They must be spared any form of detention related to migratory status, and must be guaranteed regular access to primary and secondary education." As we know from the news, detaining children happens in our own country.

The protection of children is an uncompromisable element in building community. As a Church, we have failed here in a significant way and are humbled. Leaving aside the sins of human weakness, the greater sin of the clergy abuse crisis was allowing the abuse to continue. Repeated abuse of minors does tremendous damage to them and their futures. At St. Josephine Bakhita Parish & School, we are blessed with many children, especially migrant children or first-generation Americans. They are our future and need our protection.

We are a welcoming and protecting community of faith.

How can I better understand the importance of protecting vulnerable populations? What are some of the things in life that I take for granted that migrants and refugees may not have?

As we continue with this Good Friday liturgy, let us pray that we may both welcome and protect those who are most vulnerable among us. For all those who have died a violent or early death, whether physically or spiritually, mentally or emotionally, because we failed to protect them, may God have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Holy Saturday

In his letter for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2018, Pope Francis gave us a roadmap on how to build community among diverse populations. He did so by calling to mind 4 verbs: welcome, protect, promote, and integrate. The ordering of the verbs is important. On Thursday evening we talked about to welcome through our liturgy and service, on Friday evening to protect the most vulnerable among us, tonight we will talk about to promote, and tomorrow, Easter Sunday, will be to integrate.

“Promoting,” says Pope Francis, “essentially means a determined effort to ensure that all migrants and refugees – as

well as the communities which welcome them – are empowered to achieve their potential as human beings, in all the dimensions which constitute the humanity intended by the Creator.” Pope Francis knew that the migration issue was not going away anytime soon, and in fact would become one of the leading issues facing humanity in our world of war, violence, environmental destruction, and the basic search for dignity. To be clear, this is not just an issue we are facing in our own country, but it is happening all over the world. Instead of trying to make the best of the situation, many are closing their doors and reverting back to our selfish instincts of taking care of ourselves first, which really means only taking care of ourselves. While understandable, there is no going back in our world of rapid travel, social media, and mass communication.

As we know firsthand at St. Josephine Bakhita Parish & School, immigrants and refugees bring so many gifts to our community. They broaden our horizons and make us more aware that those throughout the world are not enemies to fear, but friends to discover. Tonight, we gather as a diverse community coming from all over the world at the tomb of Jesus. We can only assume that his lifeless body is inside. What we find out tonight, however, is that the tomb is a place of potential. By dawn, the Christ will come alive and rise from the dead.

Applying this to building community and our parish mission, we must learn to see potential, new possibilities, and resurrection.

We must see all people in our community as ready to be fully alive, as the Creator intended. While never promoting evil, harm, or crime in any of our communities, whether migrant or not, we must promote anything and everything that is good.

On this holy night, I would also like to promote our candidates for full communion into the Catholic Church. Our OCIA process has been a very public process. Amara, Bernadette, Ekessi, and Kim, we first presented you to the community in November through the Rite of Acceptance, prayed with you in February for the Rite of Sending, questioned you in the Lenten Scrutiny in March, and now present you before this congregation once again for your Easter Sacraments. We do this not to embarrass you, but to promote you. You remind us of what we ourselves who are already Catholic take for granted, most especially the Eucharist and the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We look forward to the gifts that you will bring to this community.

We are a welcoming, protecting, and promoting community of faith.

How can we give more visibility to all the members of our parish and school community? How can we better complement each other in building up the Body of the Risen Christ?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that we may be a Church that promotes goodness. Let us not base our promotions off of worldly ways, so often tie to self-promotion, fame, and wealth. As Isaiah the prophet said in our third reading this evening so beautifully, "all you who are thirsty, come to the water!...come without paying and without cost." Tonight, we come to the tomb. It is not a tomb of defeat, but a tomb of potential. The stones that hold us back are now ready to be rolled away.

Easter Sunday

In his letter for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2018, Pope Francis gave us a roadmap on how to build community among diverse populations. He did so by calling to mind 4 verbs: welcome, protect, promote, and integrate. The ordering of the verbs is important. On Thursday evening we talked about to welcome through our liturgies and service, on Friday evening to protect by taking care of the vulnerable, and last night to promote by seeing the potential waiting in the tomb. Today, Easter Sunday, will be to integrate.

In his letter, Pope Francis writes, "integrating concerns the opportunities for intercultural enrichment brought by the presence of migrants and refugees." By this, he means that for integration to happen, people need to encounter each other personally, face to face, human to human, and not through what national or social media is saying. Pope Francis also explicitly notes that integration

is not assimilation. Assimilation means that only one side has to change, meaning the migrants and refugees. While it is quicker and more efficient that way, neither of those are Gospel values. Pope Francis therefore calls for a reconciled diversity where everyone involved has to change together in order for something new to be born. We do not know how long it will take or exactly what it will look like in the future. It takes trust.

This morning, we celebrate the greatest feast of the Church year: the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter. In this feast, we are certainly changed. We are forgiven of our sins, given new hope, and promised eternal life. But Jesus Christ, modeling integration for us, is also changed. As scripture scholars properly note, Jesus Christ was not just resuscitated on Easter, but resurrected. A resuscitation would be going backwards to before his death. A resurrection, however, is to go forward into a new way of being. In the Gospel stories that await us this Easter Season, the Christ will still look human, but in his resurrected form will no longer be bound by walls or locked doors. He will transcend every division that is human made and ask his followers to do the same.

Applying this to our parish mission at St. Josephine Bakhita Parish & School, we have committed ourselves to the lengthy process of integration. We are committed to integration, even when times get tough, forces larger than us move in a different direction, or conflicts within our community cause hurt feelings

and misunderstandings. We are committed to integration among our staff, ministry volunteers, ministry leaders, and parishioners. This is because we are not primarily a human community based on geography, but a resurrection community based on spirit. As the former St. Elizabeth Parish Mission Statement beautifully said, 'a community risen in Christ's love.'

We are a welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating community of faith.

How can we integrate in ways that honor our differences?
How can we better support each other in this long process of reconciled diversity among many ethnicities?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that God may continue to do something new with our Catholic community. Our parish merger process from 2023–2024 was a great dress rehearsal for what God still has in store for us. We recall that all of our merging communities were asked to change and undergo a death. For as painful as that was, I hope we are now seeing signs of our new life as one integrated community. May this be our same model on a spiritual level as we advance diverse expressions of the global Catholic church among the people of God gathered in Northland.