

# In The Footsteps of Pope Leo

## Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

I have been torn the past few months. How can I live an authentic Franciscan life in the middle of the anger, hate and blatant lies we are overwhelmed with almost daily? How do I let myself feel compassion for an elderly man in Minneapolis being dragged from his home in his underwear in the middle of winter without being sinfully angry with the ICE men who smashed in his front door? When immigrants held in the detention center in suburban Broadview are denied pastoral visits and the Eucharist, how do I keep a level head and not use the same vitriolic language our leaders often do? Where will I get the courage today to speak the Truth of Christ? How can I, as one little man, preach the Kingdom of Peace in a twisted political atmosphere without being political in the pulpit? Well, I go to Jesus, of course. And I listen to our religious leaders as a moral compass. I share their words, attitudes and that compass with you this month. Listen to all they say, particularly a certain gift from God named Leo.



On January 9, 2026 Pope Leo addressed the members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, representatives from 184 countries. Pope Leo brilliantly interwove the image of and quotes from *The City of God* by St. Augustine in that speech. The first city is, of course, the Kingdom of Heaven; the second is the city in which we live. Augustine encouraged a dialogue between these two entities; we must dwell in this temporary place while imbuing it with the values and peace of heaven. I want to present some of his text because it is essential that Catholics be engaged in our life situation, called to be apostles from our Baptism on. I believe Pope Leo is a ‘voice crying out in the wilderness’ and we Catholics must dialogue with the world situation in which we live today. We must if we are to remain faithful to the Lord, who is our Way, our Truth and our Life. Here is a paragraph from the pope’s speech that is clearly aimed at every nation and human on Mother Earth.

*In our time, the weakness of multilateralism is a particular cause for concern at the international level. A diplomacy that promotes dialogue and seeks consensus among all parties is being replaced by a diplomacy based on force, by either individuals or groups of allies. War is back in vogue and a zeal for war is spreading. The principle established after the Second World War, which prohibited nations from using force to violate the borders of others, has been completely undermined. Peace is no longer sought as a gift and a desirable good in itself, or in the pursuit of “the establishment of the ordered universe willed by God, with a more perfect form of justice among men and women.” Instead, peace is sought through weapons as a condition for asserting one’s own dominion. This gravely threatens the rule of law, which is the foundation of all peaceful civil coexistence.*

We must, as St. Augustine wrote, pursue peace in our ‘second city’ because it is the very aim of the City of God. Making peace – whether between nations or a married couple – requires the humility of Christ. Words and actions of power and selfishness make no progress toward a “peaceful civil coexistence.” We all know the energy and effort it takes to reconcile with another person after a fight or disagreement. But peace and reconciliation, the very purpose God gave the world his Son, are attainable through two virtues I see as foundational in Christian life: the humility to live truthfully and the courage to forgive.

Go to the Gospels and see how Jesus spoke – sometimes firm, yes, but always respectful. And he had the courage to bravely preach the Kingdom while facing the Roman Empire and religious leaders who wanted him dead. How can I, or any of us, be that brave? Listen to our Lord and our Church leaders

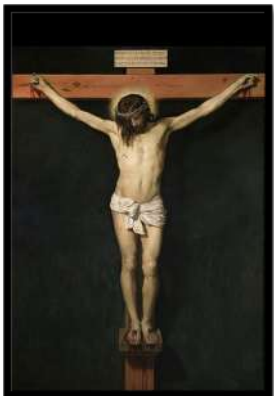
who bravely preach and write encouraging words to us about the present world situation. I find strength in them.

January 19 Cardinals Blasé Cupich of Chicago, Robert McElroy of Washington, D.D and Joseph Tobin of Newark, N.J, issued a strongly worded statement about present U.S. foreign policy that goes against everything Pope Leo expressed just ten days earlier in his address to the diplomatic corps. You can read their entire letter on the web site of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Cardinal McElroy wrote: "Catholic social teaching testifies that when national interest narrowly conceived excludes the moral imperative of solidarity among nations and the dignity of the human person, it brings immense suffering to the world and a catastrophic assault on the just peace that benefits every nation and is the will of God." God's will is peace! Remember that! **GOD'S WILL IS PEACE!**

I preached about the challenges we Catholic Christians face these days on Sunday, January 18. And I clearly stated that what I was about to say was NOT political. All these issues and situations and dynamics we live with now go far beyond party lines. We are talking morality here, and the values flowing from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The three U.S. cardinals address the events in Venezuela, Ukraine and Greenland directly as the source of questions about the use of military force and the meaning of peace. *"The balancing of national interest with the common good is being framed within starkly polarized terms. Our country's moral role in confronting evil around the world, sustaining the right to life and human dignity, and supporting religious liberty are all under examination. And the building of just and sustainable peace, so crucial to humanity's well-being now and in the future, is being reduced to partisan categories that encourage polarization and destructive policies."* **They advocate for a moral vision of American foreign policy.** The last phrase just quoted shows that the quagmire we're floating in now is not political since those lines have been blurred beyond recognition. No, our world faces a moral dilemma right now: do we work together for the common good of all nations or do we bow to the lies and dark, hidden agenda of a regime built on selfish economic gain and personal power?

There is a section of Pope Leo's January 9 speech where he speaks comprehensively about life issues that affect every human on Earth. The cardinals wrote, *"Leo points to the need for international aid to safeguard the most central elements of human dignity, which are under assault because of the movement by wealthy nations to reduce or eliminate their contributions to humanitarian foreign assistance programs."* He also spoke about the violations of conscience and religious freedom that is so destructive throughout certain countries.

Cardinals Cupich, McElroy and Tobin end their missive with this: *"We seek a foreign policy that respects and advances the right to human life, religious liberty and the enhancement of human dignity throughout the world, especially through economic assistance...Pope Leo has given us the prism through which to raise it to a much higher level. We will preach, teach and advocate in the coming months to make that higher level possible."* Archbishop Paul Coakley, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops supports the emphasis placed by the cardinals on Pope Leo's teaching in these times. I, personally, am grateful that these three leaders of the U.S. Catholic Church have spoken so forthrightly. We must learn from them and our pope as to how we dialogue with the world as people of the Gospel with Jesus Christ as our foundation. This foundation allows us in local and national Christian communities to mirror the values of what will be ours someday in the City of God. It is up to us to make that a reality in everyday life.



I have written about the virtue of humility in previous Legionnaires. Did you notice how often it was mentioned in these brief quotes from our contemporary Church leaders? It is a virtue not exactly cherished or prized in our culture, is it? Pope Leo: *"During our pilgrimage on this earth, peacemaking requires humility and courage: the humility to live truthfully and the courage to forgive. In the Christian life, we see these virtues reflected at Christmas, when Truth, the eternal Word of God, becomes humble flesh, and at Easter, when the condemned Righteous One forgives his persecutors and grants them his life as the Risen One."* Francis of Assisi was, and continues to be, the paradigm of Christian humility. He embodied what he experienced

personally in his relationship with God. Just as Jesus accepted human nature and death on the Cross, so St. Francis laid his life down by simply doing God's will. Everything about Francis was sacrifice in imitation of Jesus. The humility of the Crucified Christ guided everything he did in the years after his conversion to the Gospel Way in 1205. Whether for the new brothers God sent to the fraternity or something the Church universal would need in its future, he served humbly; it was his gentle nature and faith that allowed Francis to "live truthfully and have the courage to forgive." He travelled widely and respected every person as an image of God. He preached the Truth of God's Kingdom. His heart was one of reconciliation as a messenger of peace.

It's easy to quote Jesus, St. Francis, a pope and cardinals. What about plain ole us? How do we live Gospel values faithfully while contending with the craziness of ICE, Venezuela, Greenland and as Pope Leo wrote, a culture of war? I honestly believe with everything I am that there is more goodness in our world than evil. We believers bear a moral responsibility to stand up to evil and counteract it with love. This does not mean we have to be political in the usual sense of partisan politics. To love is our Baptismal mission – to be 'priest, prophet and servant' to others. Dr. Martin L. King: *"Love is the greatest force in the universe. It is the heartbeat of the moral cosmos. Those who love are participants in the being of God."* The Truth of God is what we live from birth onward – if we choose to live in that love. George Orwell observed that *"In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act."* Jesus was given to us by God in an ultimate act of self-revelation. We see who God is and who we humans can be in the life of Christ. To love and to live the Truth is to make the Kingdom of Heaven present in the here-and-now. Jesus was rejected by almost everyone because he lived and preached God; some expected a military leader who would conquer Rome with a relentless quest for power that leaves most people in the dirt. Christ came to us out of love with God's forgiveness. We actually hold in our hearts God's power to heal our world and shift the paradigm of life from evil to Truth. We bring Christ to our ailing world with acts and words of compassion and healing. Even when it appears an oligarch is prevailing.



Pie in the sky? Well, as St. Augustine wrote in *The City of God*: *"peace is the aim of our good, because it is the very aim of the City of God, to which we aspire, even unconsciously."* If peace is the aim of all we do to bring Christ into reality, it is faith and hope that are our sources of strength. We can offer people hope that the darkness around us is not the end with a simple smile, a word of affirmation, a hug in the pool of loneliness. Jesus left the earth with a handful of disciples and 11 apostles; look what the People of God have done since! Do not answer hate speech with ugliness. Do not let negativity be the guiding force in your heart with

constant judgements and criticism. It's one thing to make observations, it's another to fight fire with fire. St. Bonaventure's ascription of God (and my favorite) is: *God is Beauty Itself*. Fill your life, family and friends with beautiful things. One rose or a box of special tea can be sunlight in the winter. *I love you* is more powerful than financial tariffs! **Amor vincit omnia. Love conquers everything.**

*I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.* " Martin Luther King, Jr.

**2026 marks the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Francis of Assisi.** Yes, 800<sup>th</sup>! Believe me, we will celebrate this moment in our Franciscan history at St. Peter's in many ways. As you see quite plainly at times, we live and minister in an aging building that needs constant repair. Our staff tries their best to keep up with the fundamental needs – everything from the two elevators to new temperature dials on our kitchen ovens. Please continue to support us with your prayers, your financial gifts and your faithful presence. We see the work of God when you express your faith and love for God with us in the sacraments, in moments of reflection and in our Franciscan atmosphere where everyone is welcome. You inspire us to serve even better! May 2026 bring our world and our hearts a lasting peace, an ever-deeper commitment to the Gospel Way and the knowledge that we are never, ever alone in life.

*Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm*