

**Archbishop Bernardito C. Auza
Basilica of Old St. Patrick, New York
50th Anniversary Celebration of the Community of Sant'Egidio
May 25, 2018
Deut 30:19-20, Ps 85, Acts 2:42-47, Lk 10:25-42**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is a great joy for me to be with you tonight, here at this beautifully restored Basilica of Old St. Patrick's Cathedral, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Community of Sant'Egidio. Old Saint Patrick's may not be as ancient, splendid and historical as Santa Maria in Trastevere, but it does provide us a prayerful atmosphere as we celebrate this Sant'Egidio's landmark event.

It's an occasion on which we thank the Lord for all the graces he has given to the members of the Community throughout the past half-century and for the tremendous fruit that through the community God has been able to accomplish. It's also a time in which we turn to God and offer ourselves anew in his service, so that he can indeed use us to bear more even fruit for his glory and for the good of all of those he has given us the privilege to serve.

It's also a good excuse for me to recall my first contacts with the Community. It was 1986. I was a newly arrived student in Rome when I met my first teacher of Italian, one of the original members of Sant'Egidio. He was not a professor in Italian, but he lent his time to volunteer to teach Italian to newcomers from poor countries and local Churches. I realize now that the Superiors at the Pontifical Filipino College in Rome may have asked him to teach us Italians, not because he was the best teacher around, but because... he was free!

I lived in Rome for more than 11 years. During those years, on several occasions, usually on Saturdays, I joined the common evening prayers of the members of the Community, first at the Church of Sant'Egidio --- which, needless to say, gave the Community its name --- and later, when Sant'Egidio became too small to the increasing number of members and friends, at the

splendid Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere. It was, indeed, a shining example of how those men and women, while having full-time daily jobs, dedicated precious time, not only to helping the needy, but also to pray together. I always had and continues to have pretty good excuses for missing a prayer or two, but Sant'Egidio seems to be telling me that if I am too busy to pray, I am too busy to be a Christian.

Brothers and Sisters,

There are so many people today who, like the victim of robbers in the famous Parable of the Good Samaritan in today's Gospel, are languishing in desperate need as many in the world, influenced as they are by what Pope Francis has called a globalized indifference, pass by the other side, unmoved and uninvolved. There are still more than a billion people in extreme poverty. But when you travel in the developing world, you would think that there must be well over one billion people living in extreme poverty. There are roughly 260 million people in the world crossing international borders of whom so many are fleeing wars and desperate and extreme situations, while more than 65 million are internally displaced and constantly subjected to the horrors of war and conflict. There are more than 40 million modern slaves, inextricably ensnared in sexual and labor trafficking. There are so many who are simply left on the margins, unwanted and unloved.

“Who is my neighbor?,” the scholar of the law in the Gospel asks. We've heard Jesus' answer so many times that to us the answer might seem obvious, but it wasn't. In fact the question of who is one's neighbor was one of the most discussed and controversial debates among Israelites during the time of Jesus. A typical Jew was raised with an attitude to which Jesus referred in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’” (Mt 5:43). Therefore, if one were to love one's neighbor and detest one's enemy, it was crucial to determine who was one's neighbor and who was one's adversary. Almost all Jews admitted that one's neighbor extended beyond one's family or those who lived physically proximate. Most interpreters considered that one's

neighbor included all fellow Israelites and those gentiles who adhered to the Mosaic Law. But no one was quite prepared for Jesus' answer, which he gave in the form of the parable of the Good Samaritan. He basically said that *everyone* is in our neighborhood — even those considered enemies, as Jews and Samaritans deemed each other.

**One of the things most distinctive about the Community of Sant'Egidio is that its members recognize that
the whole world is their neighborhood,
and everyone in need is their neighbor,
and every victim of war is their sister,
and every victim of oppression is their brother,
and every child dying of famine is their own child,
and every child who has never been to school is their own student,
and every elderly poor abandoned is their own parent,
and every step that we must take must be a step to achieving peace.**

Their hearts don't turn cold in front of all forms of human miseries. They dirty their hands, reaching out to existential peripheries. They are not afraid to cross the road, or the mountain range, or the ocean, to give Christian love and human compassion to those who have been mugged, bruised, beaten, victimized, and abandoned by others in this world. They are not intimidated to become the donkeys to bring the needy to safety, or use their resources to nurse them back to health in the inn of other Church-in-miniature that is their community. They grasp that to be a Good Samaritan means, like Christ, draw close to those who are in need, close enough to become their neighbor, and to love them in deeds. To use the expression of the Book of Deuteronomy from today's first reading, they forthrightly choose life, and they do so by loving the Lord, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him, not in some abstract way but in the occasionally distressing disguise of the hungry, thirst, naked, stranger, ill, imprisoned, and war ravaged.

When Pope Francis met with the Community in 2014, he summed up the Sant'Egidio charism in three Ps: prayer, the poor and peace. He returned to

those three Ps when he celebrated with the members of the Community at Santa Maria in Trastevere on March 11. The first is prayer, which is at the heart of any activity that's truly Catholic. Prayer isn't just one other thing that Catholics do, but it is at the root of our existence. Without it, our apostolic works eventually become like cars without gas or cell phones without batteries. We are branches grafted onto Jesus the Vine, and unless we remain in him, and he in us, we can bear no fruit. And prayer is not just an exchange of words, or hopes or ideas, but ultimately an exchange of persons, a mutual abiding.

That's why the daily evening prayer of the Sant'Egidio Community, famous for its beauty and vitality, is so crucial in maintaining the intensity of their attention to the neighbor in need. It's the secret of Sant'Egidio's fruitfulness. So many de-stress and unwind in bars after a hard day's work; other's in gyms and theaters. The members of Sant'Egidio Community spends the evening in community prayer.... When I went there to pray with them, we did have some pizza and beer afterwards! No trendy and expensive Trastevere restaurants, but a simply pizzeria in a side street.

We usually listen to the Parable of the Prodigal Son, ending with Jesus's incredibly beautiful command, "Go and do same." But, this evening, we went beyond that to arrive in Bethany, in the house of Jesus's friends Martha, Mary and Lazarus. The busybody Martha was moving about the house, above all in the kitchen, it seems, to prepare the meal and the table. But when she asks Jesus to tell her sister Mary to get up and help her with the duties of hospitality, Jesus gives her an important principle that she couldn't grasp in all her anxiety: that he comes to us principally not to be fed but to feed. It's only by being filled with God's love that we can love him back and begin to love our neighbor as God has loved us. That's what Mary grasped that Martha, for all her tangible deeds of love, needed to learn. That's what the Sant'Egidio Community teaches the world by its prayer. In our prayer, we choose the one thing necessary, the better part, and allow God to make us better by conforming us more to him and helping us from the inside to love others as Jesus desires and others deserve.

And from this prayer flows an authentically Christian community. We stay together as we pray together, because our communion with God forms our communion with each other. We see in the early Church that that they were committed to four things: prayer, the Eucharist, the teaching of the apostles and communal life. They prayed together. They went up to the Temple together. They believed the one faith taught by the apostles together. And the love that they had for each other was itself a powerful proclamation of the Gospel, as St. Luke tells us that “every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Our loving communion with each other would be the authenticating sign of Jesus’ mission and the means by which people would come to discover the love God has for them. There’s no wonder, then, that the Sant’Egidio Community continues to grow and to draw many to share in its prayer, in its communal life, and in the works that flow from its two-fold communion with God and with each other.

In the Responsorial Psalm tonight, we see the connection between prayer and deeds. “I will hear what the Lord God has to say,” we prayed, “a voice that speaks of peace, peace for his people and his friends and those who turn to him in their hearts.” When we pray to God for his mercy and saving help, he gives us his holy word, and that message speaks to us of peace, peace with him and with each other. In prayer, faithfulness and mercy meet in such a way that it impels us to embrace justice and peace. Prayer makes us children of God and, as children of God, peacemakers.

For a Christian, it’s not enough to be a peace-wisher. Our broken world is full of those. We’re called by the Lord to be peacemakers and peacebuilders. Over the last 50 years, the members of Sant’Egidio have been able to bring peace to so many parts of the planet because they have first received it in their prayer and in their communal life. As the number of conflicts throughout the world grows, as we continue to confront the situation of so many living in poverty, the need for Sant’Egidio to pray even more fervently, and for the whole Church to pray with it, likewise is growing.

As we prepare to enter into THE Lord's supreme act of love in the Last Supper and on the Cross, we call to mind that the Lord himself, like the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, was once ambushed in a garden, then stripped, beaten and left to die on a Cross. When he was dying there, most of his disciples fled. Only a few faithful followers — the Blessed Mother, St. John, St. Mary Magdalene — drew close to him. Only these proved neighbor to him on that day. As we seek to follow in their footsteps, we ask the Lord for the gift that, recognizing him here under the humble appearances of bread and wine, we might recognize him in all those in need and that we might have the courage to love him in that disguise. May the Good Samaritan whom we're about to receive help us from within to become his hands, his feet, his compassionate heart. Amen.