

“But I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion”



Transcript of the speech given by Mother Teresa (Saint Teresa of Calcutta, 1910-1997) at the National Prayer Breakfast, Washington DC, 3 February 1994

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[audience applause]

Make us worthy, Lord, to serve our fellow man throughout the world who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them through our hands this day their daily bread, and by our understanding love, give peace and joy.

Jesus came to give us the good news that God loves us, and that He wants us to love one another as he loves each one of us. And to make it easy for us to love one another, Jesus said, "Whatever you do to the least, you do it to me."¹ "If you give a glass of water, you give it to me."² "If you receive a little child in my name, you receive me."³ So, whatever you do to the least, you do it to me.

And where does this love begin? In our own family.

¹ Matthew 25.40

² Matthew 10.42

³ Matthew 18.5

How does it begin? By praying together.

Family that prays together, stays together. And if you stay together, you will love each other as God loves each one of you. So teach your children to pray, and pray with them; and you will have the joy and the peace and the unity of Christ's own love living in you.

As we have gathered together here, I think it will be beautiful if you begin with a prayer that expresses very well what Jesus wants us to do for the least. St. Francis of Assisi understood very well these words of Jesus and in his life very well expressed by prayer. And this prayer, which we say every day after Holy Communion, always surprises me very much, because it is very fitting for each one of us. And [I] always wonder whether 800 years ago, when St. Francis lived, they had the same difficulties that we have today. I think that some of you already have this prayer of peace -- so we will pray it together.

Let us pray.

"Lord, make me a channel of your peace" --

Do you have the prayer book? [to audience].

We will say it together?

[audience in unison]

*Lord, make me a channel of Your peace,
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.*

*O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
it is in dying that we are born again to Eternal Life.*

Let us thank God for the opportunity He has given us today to have come here to pray together. We have come here especially to pray for peace, for joy, and for love. We are reminded that Jesus came to bring the good news to the poor. He had told us what is that good news when He said: "*My Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you.*"⁴ He came not to give the peace of the world, which is only that we don't bother each other. He came to give the peace of heart which comes from loving, from doing good to others.

And God loved the world so much that He gave His Son -- it was a giving. God gave His son to the Virgin Mary, and what did she do with Him? As soon as Jesus came into Mary's life, immediately she went in haste to give that good news. And as she came into the house of her cousin, Elizabeth, Scripture tells us that the unborn child -- the child in the womb of Elizabeth -- leapt with joy.⁵ While still in the womb of Mary, Jesus brought peace to John the Baptist who leapt for joy in the womb of Elizabeth. The unborn was the first one to proclaim the coming of Christ.

And as if that were not enough, as if it were not enough that God the Son should become one of us and bring peace and joy while still in the womb of Mary, Jesus also died on the Cross to show that greater love. He died for you and for me, and for that leper, and for that man dying of hunger, and that naked person lying in the street, not only of Calcutta, but of Africa, and all over the world.

Our Sisters serve these poor people in 105 countries throughout the world. Jesus insisted that we love one another as He loves each one of us. Jesus gave His life to love us and He tells us that we also have to give whatever it takes to do good to one another. And in the Gospel Jesus says very clearly: "*Love as I have loved you.*"⁶

⁴ John 14.27

⁵ Luke 1.40-41

⁶ John 13.34

Jesus died on the Cross because that is what it took for Him to do good to us -- to save us from our selfishness and sin. He gave up everything to do the Father's will, to show us that we too must willing -- must be willing to give up everything to do God's will -- to love one another as He loves each one of us.

If we are not willing to give whatever it takes to do good to one another, sin is still in us. That is why we too must give to each other until it hurts. It is not enough to say -- for us to say: "I love God." But I also have to love my neighbour. St. John says that you are a liar if you say you love God and you don't love your neighbour.⁷ How can you love God whom you do not see, if you do not love your neighbour whom you see,⁸ whom you touch, with whom you live? And so it is very important for us to realize that love, to be true, has to hurt. I must be willing to give whatever it takes not to harm other people and, in fact, to do good to them. This requires that I be willing to give until it hurts. Otherwise, there is no true love in me; and I bring injustice, not peace, to those around me.

It hurt Jesus to love us. We have been created in His image for greater things, to love and to be loved. We must "put on Christ," as Scripture tells us. And so, we have been created to love as He loves us. Jesus makes Himself the hungry one, the naked one, the homeless one, the unwanted one, and He says, "*You did it to Me.*" On the last day He will say to those on His right, "*Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to Me.*"⁹ And He will also say to those on His left, "*Whatever you neglected to do for the least of these, you neglected to do it for Me.*"¹⁰

When He was dying on the Cross, Jesus said, "*I thirst.*"¹¹ Jesus is thirsting for our love, and this is the thirst of everyone, poor and rich alike. We all thirst for love of others, that they go out of their way to avoid harming us and to do good to us. This is the meaning of true love, to give until it hurts.

⁷ 1 John 4.20

⁸ 1 John 4.20

⁹ Matthew 25.40

¹⁰ Matthew 25.45

¹¹ John 19.28

I can never forget the experience I had in visiting a home where they kept all these old parents of sons and daughters who had just put them into an institution and forgotten them. Maybe. I saw that in that home these old people had everything -- good food, comfortable place, television, everything, but everyone was looking toward the door. And I did not see a single one with a smile on the face. I turned to the Sister and I asked: "Why do these people, who have every -- every comfort here, they are there looking toward the door? Why are they not smiling? I am so used to seeing the smiles on our people, even the dying ones smile." And Sister said: "This is the way it is nearly everyday. They are expecting -- they are hoping that a son or a daughter will come to visit them. They are hurt because they are forgotten."

And see, this neglect to love brings spiritual poverty. Maybe in our own family we have somebody who is feeling lonely, who is feeling sick, who is feeling worried. Are we there? Are we willing to give until it hurts in order to be with our family, or do we put our interests first? These are the questions we must ask ourselves, especially as we begin this year of the family. We must remember that love begins at home. And we must also remember that: The future of humanity passes through the family.

I was surprised in the West to see so many young boys and girls given to drugs. And I tried to find out why. Why is it like that, when those in the West have so many more things than those in the East? And the answer was: because there is no one in the family to receive them. Our children depend on us for everything -- their health, their nutrition, their security, their coming to know and love God. For all of this, they look to us with trust, hope, and expectation. But often father and mother are so busy they have no time for their children, or perhaps they are not even married or have given up on their marriage. So their children go to the streets and get involved in drugs or other things. We are talking of love of the child, which is where love and peace must begin -- there, in our own family.

But I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because Jesus said, "*If you receive a little child, you receive me.*"¹² So, every abortion is the denial of receiving Jesus -- is the neglect of receiving Jesus.

[audience sustained applause]

It is really a war against the child, a direct killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other

¹² Matthew 18.5

people not to kill one another? How do we persuade a woman not to have an abortion? As always, we must persuade her with love and we remind ourselves that love means to be willing to give until it hurts.

Jesus gave even His life to love us. So, the mother who is thinking of abortion should be helped to love -- that is, to give until it hurts her plans, her free time, to respect the life of her child. For the child is the greatest gift of God to the family because they have been created to love and to be loved.

The father of that child, however, must also give until it hurts.

By abortion, the mother does not learn to love, but kills even her own child to solve her problems. And, by abortion, the father is told that he does not have to take any responsibility at all for the child he has brought into the world. That -- So that father is likely to put other women into the same trouble. So, abortion just leads to more abortion. Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching its people to love one another, but to use any violence to get what they want. This is why the greatest destroyer of love and peace is abortion.

[audience applause]

The beautiful gift God has given our congregation is to fight abortion by adoption.

[audience applause]

We have given already -- We have given already from one house in Calcutta, over 3,000 children in adoption. And I can't tell you what joy, what love, what peace those children have brought into those families. It has been a real gift of God for them and for us. I remember one of the little ones got very sick, so I sent for the father and the mother and I asked them: "Please give me back the sick child. I will give you a healthy one." And the father looked at me and said, "Mother Teresa, take my life first -- then take the child." So beautiful to see it. So much love, so much joy that little one has brought into that family. So pray for us that we continue this beautiful gift. And also I offer you, since our Sisters are here, anybody who doesn't want the child, please give it to me. I -- I want the child.

[audience applause]

I will tell you something beautiful. As I already told you, the abortion by adoption -- by care of the mother and adoption for her baby. We have saved thousands of lives. We have sent

word to the clinics, to the hospitals and police stations: "Please don't destroy the child. We will take the child." So we always have someone tell the mothers in trouble: "Come, we will take -- take care of you. We will get a home for your child." And we have a tremendous demand from couples who cannot have a child. But I never give a child to a couple who have done something not to have a child. Jesus said, "*Anyone who receives a child in my name, receives me.*" ¹³ By adopting a child, these couples receive Jesus but, by aborting a child, a couple refuses to receive Jesus.

Please don't kill the child. I want the child. Please give me the child. I am willing to accept any child who would be aborted and to give that child to [a] married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child.

I know that couples have to plan their family and for that there is natural family planning. The way to plan the family is natural family planning, not contraception. In destroying the power of giving life, of loving, through contraception, a husband or wife is doing something to self. This turns the attention to self, and so it destroys the gifts of love in him and her.

In loving, the husband and wife must turn the attention to each other, as happen[s] in natural family planning, and not to self, as happens in contraception. Once that living love is destroyed by contraception, abortion follows very easily. That's why I never give a child to a family that has used contraception -- because if the mother has destroyed the power of loving, how will she love my child?

I also know that there are great problems in the world -- that many spouses do not love each other enough to practice [natural family planning]. We cannot solve [all] the problems in the world, but let us never bring in the worst problem of all -- to destroy love, to destroy life.

The poor are very great people. They can teach us so many beautiful things. Once, one of them came to thank us for teaching her natural family planning and said: "You people who have practiced chastity, you are the best people to teach us natural family planning because it is nothing more than self-control out of love for each other." And what this poor person said is very true. These poor people maybe have nothing to eat, maybe -- maybe they have not a home to live in, but they can still be great people when they are spiritually rich and love one another as God loves each one of them.

¹³ Mark 9.36

When I pick up a person from the streets, hungry, I give him a plate of rice, a piece of bread. But a person who is shut out, who feels unwanted, unloved, terrified, the person who has been thrown out of society -- that spiritual poverty is much harder to be overcome. And abortion, which often follows from contraception, brings a people to be spiritually poor, and that is the worst poverty and the most difficult to overcome.

Those who are materially poor can be very wonderful people. One evening we went out and we picked up four people from the street. And one of them was in a most terrible condition. I told the Sisters: "You take care of the other three; I will take care of the one who looks worse." So I did for her all that my love can do. I put her in bed, and there was such a beautiful smile on her face. She took hold of my hand, as she said one word only: "Thank you." And she died.

I couldn't help but examine my conscience before her. And I asked: "What would I say if I were in her place?" And my answer was very simple. I would have tried to draw a little attention to myself. I would have said: "I am hungry. I am dying. I am cold. I am in pain." But she gave me much more: She gave me her grateful love. She died with a big smile on her face.

Then there was the man we picked up from the drain, half eaten with worms. And after we had brought him to the home, he only said, "I have lived like an animal in the street, but I am going to die as an angel, loved and cared." Then, after we had removed all the worms from his body, all he said, with a big smile: "Sister, I am going home to God." And he died. I[t] was -- was so wonderful to see the greatness of that man who could speak like that without blaming anybody, without comparing anything, like an angel. This is the greatness of people who are spiritually rich even when they are materially poor.

We are not social workers. We may be doing social work in the eyes of some people, but we must be contemplatives in the heart of the world. For we must bring that presence of God into your family. For the family that prays together, stays together. There is so much hatred, so much misery, and we with our prayer, with our sacrifice, are beginning at home. Love begins at home, and it is not how much we do, but how much love we put into what we do.

If we are contemplatives in the heart of the world with all its problem[s], these problems can never...discourage us. We must always remember that God tells us in Scripture: "*Even if a mother could forget the child in her womb*" -- something impossible, but even if she could

forget -- "*I will never forget you.*" ¹⁴

And so, here I am talking with you. I want you to find the poor here, right in your own home first. And begin love there. Be that good news to your own people first. And find out about your next-door neighbour. Do you know who they are?

I had the most extraordinary experience of love of neighbour with a Hindu family. A gentleman came to our house and said: "Mother Teresa, there is a family who have not eaten for so long. Do something." So I took some rice and went there immediately. And I saw the children, their eyes shining with hunger. I don't know if you have ever seen hunger. But I have seen it very often. And the mother of the family took the rice I gave her and went out. When she came back, I asked her: "Where did you go? What did you do?" And she gave me a very simple answer: "They are hungry also."

What struck me was that she knew. And who [were they]? A Muslim family. And she knew that they were hungry. And I did not bring any more rice that evening because I wanted them, Hindus and family -- and Muslim family, to enjoy the joy of loving each others. She just left her own children, who were hungry; her first thought was her neighbour. But there were those children, radiating joy, sharing the joy and peace of their mother because she had the love to give until it hurts. And you see this is where love begins -- at home in the family.

So, as the example of this family shows, God will never forget us, and there is something you and I can always do. We can keep the joy of loving Jesus in our hearts, and share that joy with all we come in contact with. Let us make that one point -- that no child will be unwanted, unloved, uncared for, or killed and thrown away. And give until it hurts -- with a smile.

As you know, we have homes -- a number of homes here in the United States, where people need tender love and care. This is the joy of sharing. Come and share. We have the young people suffering with AIDS. They need that tender love and care. But such beautiful -- I've never yet seen a young man or anybody die ... displeased or angry or frightened, really going home to God. Such a beautiful smile, always. So let us pray that we have the gift of sharing the joy with others and loving until it hurts.

Because I talk so much of giving with a smile, once a professor from the United States asked

¹⁴ Isaiah 49.15

me: "Are you married?" And I said: "Yes, and I find it sometimes very difficult to smile at my spouse, Jesus, because He can be -- He can be very demanding sometimes." [audience laughter] This is really something true. And [this] is where love comes in: when it is demanding, and yet we can give it with joy.

One of the most demanding things for me is travelling everywhere -- and with publicity. I have said to Jesus that if I don't go to heaven for anything else, I will be going to heaven for all the travelling with all the publicity, because it has purified me and sacrificed me and made me really ready to go home to God. [audience laughter]

If we remember that God loves us, and that we can love others as He loves us, then America can become a sign of peace for the whole world, be a sign of joy. From here, a sign of care for the weakest [of] the weak, the unborn child, must go out to the world. If you become a burning light of justice and peace in the world, then really you will be true to what the founders -- founders of this country stood for.

Let us love one another as God loves each one of us. ¹⁵

And where does this love begin? In our own home.

How does it begin? By praying together.

Pray for us that we continue God's work with great love. The sisters, the brothers, and the fathers, lay missionaries of Charity, and coworkers: We are all one heart full of love, that we may bring that joy of loving everywhere we go.

And my -- my prayer for you is that through this love for one another, for this peace and joy in the family, that you may grow in holiness. Holiness is not the luxury of the few; it is a simply duty, for you and for me, because Jesus has very clearly said, "*Be ye holy as the father in heaven is holy.*" ¹⁶ So let us pray for each other that we grow in love for each other, and through this love become holy, as Jesus wants us to be, for he died out of love for us.

One day, I met a lady who was dying of cancer in a most terrible condition. And I told her, I

¹⁵ John 13.34

¹⁶ Matthew 5.48

say, "You know, this terrible pain is only the kiss of Jesus, a sign that you have come so close to Jesus on the cross that he can kiss you." And she joined her hands together and said, "Mother Teresa, please tell Jesus to stop kissing me." [audience laughter]

So pray for us that we continue God's work with great love. And I will pray for you -- for all your families.

And also I want to thank the families who have been so generous in giving their daughters to us to -- to consecrate their life to Jesus by the vow of poverty, chastity, obedience, and by giving wholehearted, free service to the poorest of the poor. This is our fourth vow in our congregation. And we have a novitiate in San Francisco where we have many beautiful vocations who are wanting to give their whole life to Jesus in the service of the poorest of the poor.

So, once more, I thank you for giving your children to God. And pray for us that we continue God's work with great love.

God bless you all.

[audience sustained applause]

