

Speaker Ryan: Ryan's address to the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast

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WASHINGTON—At the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast today, House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) urged all Catholics to come together to address the spread of tribalism and identity politics in our country. Following are Speaker Ryan's remarks, as prepared for delivery:

"Good morning, everybody. I am honored to be here with friends and colleagues—people I have admired and worked with for a long time.

"So there is a psalm I like a lot. It is the 46th psalm: 'Be still and know that I am God.'

"We live our lives at such a relentless pace. There's rarely time to slow down, let alone be still.

"But the stillness of reflection—of prayer—is where we reconnect with our faith, with our place in the circle of humanity.

"Stillness is even more precious in a time when our public discourse has become more raucous than rational. 'The survival of the shrillest,' some have called it.

"We tend to fixate on the shrillness, but let's talk about survival for a moment. It seems like we are always in survival mode, doesn't it? Trying to get through the day, if not the hour. We go through the motions, we argue on the margins. We get absorbed in intrigue that isn't so intriguing.

"There is a line attributed to Saint Augustine: 'God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them.'

"I want to spend a few minutes reflecting on some of the gifts God is trying to give us, namely what Catholic social doctrine brings to public life.

"Because there is a deeply serious problem we see right now within our society.

"We see moral relativism becoming more and more pervasive in our culture. Identity politics and tribalism have grown on top of this. All of it has been made more prevalent by 21st century technology. And there is plenty of money to be made on making it worse.

"If there was ever a time and place where Catholics—from the clergy to the laity—are needed, it is here and now, in helping to solve this problem.

"Our social doctrine is a perfect antidote to what ails our culture. It begins with a vision of a free and virtuous society—not a set of policy prescriptions or even a toolkit for producing those prescriptions—but a vision of dignity and possibility.

"It is a vision that inspires us to serve the common good, to live faithfully, and to renew the hope that our Founders' vision of liberty and justice for all can be achieved in our less-than-perfect world.

"As lay Catholics, nothing is more fulfilling than living out our faith, with joy, with passion, with purpose. It is why this breakfast was founded, to heed Saint John Paul II's call for a 'new evangelization.' 'Cast out to the deep,' he would say.

"Because again, we are so often stuck in the shallow end, in survival mode.

"Our social doctrine does not offer instant answers or easy outcomes. It gives us something far more important, far more animating: a way to conduct our public discourse so that a measure of wisdom is achieved through common work toward noble ends.

"This goes beyond a call for civility. The problems we are facing are bigger than the tone we take.

"Our social doctrine teaches us that democracy requires solidarity, a sense of civic friendship. We see our neighbors as partners in this common enterprise—even when we disagree, especially when we disagree.

"That friendship is the foundation for a mature civic patriotism, where we live our freedom for the common good, not just our personal gain.

"It is a patriotism grounded in respect for the inherent dignity and inalienable value of every person. We believe every person has a role and a voice in the community of concern and protection. No one is written off.

"The good news—the great news—is that there are new evangelizers living out this doctrine all around us.

"One of them is a woman named Heather Reynolds. Heather runs Catholic Charities Fort Worth.

"For years, I had been hearing about all the great work they were doing down there. Last month, I finally had the chance to see it firsthand.

"We sat down with some of their clients and case workers. That's how they do everything: case management, a customized approach.

"One gentleman, his name was Chris. Chris grew up in a big family, and he watched his older siblings get into all kinds of trouble.

"His fate was the farm or the oil field. That was it. No way out.

"One day Chris told his wife, he wanted to go to nursing school. He reached out to Catholic Charities.

"They helped him navigate the system, figure out how to make it work. Even after he graduated, they are still there for him and his family.

"What stands out for Chris is not any one thing Catholic Charities did to help him. It is, he said, 'the feeling that you have an out, that you don't have to settle.'

"This, to me, is the great manifestation of the social magisterium. It is that sense of self-worth and meaning we can receive only from the institutions closest to us.

"People and problems are not treated as abstractions. The work is done eye-to-eye, soul-to-soul.

"That capacity to flourish—and to falter—is at the very heart of subsidiarity.

"See, that's a word I can use with this audience, subsidiarity. It is a beautiful principle, especially when conjoined with its rightful partner: solidarity.

"Catholic social teaching tells us that our public moral culture—the foundation of our political culture—is shaped by these natural institutions and free associations of civil society.

"And it cautions us against allowing the state too great a reach into civil society.

"Otherwise, we risk stifling what de Tocqueville found so admirable in our young republic: those instincts for free association, philanthropy, and voluntarism.

"We need these mediating institutions in our lives. We need them to be healthy and vibrant. They are not just a pause from the noise, or a refuge from the ugliness. They are part of the antidote to what ails our society.

"Pope Francis has called all Catholics to be healers of the walking wounded. We should welcome that reminder, for it brings us back to what Catholics in this country have done for generations.

"We should all insist that public policy at every level permits Catholic institutions the maximum freedom to serve the poor...the elderly...children yearning for foster families...women in crisis pregnancies...families torn apart by the opioid epidemic: all those who look to the church for the help they need to live lives of purpose. We should insist on this.

"Mother Teresa, now Saint Teresa, once said this: 'God has not called me to be successful. He has called me to be faithful.'

"The journey is the thing. It always has been. We obsess about how things look. Everything in politics is about 'optics,' a word I assure you I will not miss.

"Think of the good we could do if we spent a little more time looking inward, pondering how we are all imperfect, we are all fallen. Everything flows from that common humanity, from that stillness.

"Let us recommit ourselves to living not just successful lives, but the faithful lives that the grace of God makes possible for all of us. Let us recapture these beautiful, unifying principles of Catholic social teaching.

"That's how we can give America a new birth of freedom rightly understood. That's how we can sustain the institutions of self-governance. That's how we can transform the public debate.

"At this moment, with these challenges before us, I see a tremendous opportunity for Catholics to lead...to help bring our culture and our country closer to their great moral potential.

"We are uniquely suited for this task, but from the clergy to the laity, we all have to be willing to step up. We all have to be willing to 'cast out to the deep.'

"Now I do not know what lies in store for me next.

"But I promise you this: I am going to continue thinking about, and talking about, these things.

"Even if it is just as a parishioner in Janesville, Wisconsin at coffee and donuts after Mass, I will be there.

"Thank you for listening this morning.

"I pray that the peace of Christ will be with you, with your families, and with this nation we love, always."