Address to the National Conference of Catholic Charities

Franklin D. Roosevelt

October 4, 1933

Cardinal Hayes, Your Excellency, ladies and gentlemen:

Coming down through the crowd this evening, my old friend, Monsignor Keegan, paid me the nicest compliment I have had since the fourth of March because he said, “Remember, way back before the fourth of March, when you said you would come to this dinner in October? And now you have come.”

In the midst of problems of material things, in the machine age of invention, of finance, of international suspicion and renewed armaments, every one of us must gain satisfaction and strength in the knowledge that social justice is becoming an ever-growing factor and influence in almost every part of the world today. With every passing year I become more confident that humanity is moving forward to the practical application of the teachings of Christianity as they affect the individual lives of men and women everywhere.

It is fitting that this annual National Conference of Catholic Charities should celebrate also, at the same time, the centennial of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. I like to remember the day a hundred years ago, the taunt of atheists, the taunt of the enemies of the Christian religion in the Paris of 1833, when they demanded of the churches, “Show us your works.” Yes, I like to remember it because of the acceptance of that challenge, and the decision to show that Christianity was not dead, and that the deeds of Christians were in accordance with their faith. This one Society, this past year, in their task of visitation and relief of the poor in their own homes and in hospitals and institutions, aided more than one hundred and fifty thousand families within the borders of our country; and, with other great organizations of men and women connected with all the
churches in all the land, it is working with similar unselfishness for the alleviation of human suffering and the righting of human wrong. When I think of this I am confirmed in my deep belief that God is marching on.

Monsignor Keegan has mentioned the fact that seven months ago this very day, standing at the portals of the capitol at Washington, about to assume the responsibilities of the Presidency, I told the people of America that we were going to face facts, no matter how hard and how difficult those facts might be, and that it was my firm belief that the only thing we had to fear was fear itself.

I believed then—and I know now—that our people would support definite action that sought the goal of giving every man his due. Leadership, I have tried to give, but the great and the outstanding fact, my friends, has been the response—the wholehearted response—of America. As we have recaptured and rekindled our pioneering spirit, we have insisted that it shall always be a spirit of justice, a spirit of teamwork, a spirit of sacrifice, and, above all, a spirit of neighborliness.

We have sought to adjust the processes of industrial and agricultural life, and in so doing we have sought to view the picture as a whole. Revival of industry, redemption of agriculture, reconstruction of banking, development of public works, the lifting of crushing debt—all these in every part of the Nation call for a willingness to sacrifice individual gains, to work together for the public welfare and for the success of a broad national program of recovery. We have to have courage and discipline and vision to blaze the new trails in life; but underlying all our efforts is the conviction that men cannot live unto themselves alone. A democracy, the right kind of democracy, is bound together by the ties of neighborliness.

That tie, my friends, has been the guiding spirit of your work for the sick, for the children in need, and for the aged and friendless. And you who have participated in the actual day-to-day work of practical and useful charity understand well that no program of recovery can suddenly restore all our people to self-support. This is the time when you and I know that though we have proceeded a portion of the way, the longer, harder part still lies ahead; we must redouble our efforts to care for those who must still depend upon relief, to prevent the disintegration of home life, and to stand by the victims of the depression until it is definitely past.

The Federal Government has inaugurated new measures of relief on a vast scale, but the Federal Government cannot, and does not intend to, take over the whole job. Many times we have insisted that every community and every State must first do its share.

Out of this picture we are developing a new science of social treatment and rehabilitation—working it out through an unselfish partnership, a partnership between great church and private social service agencies and the agencies of Government itself. From the point of view of fixing responsibilities, the prevention of overlapping, the prevention of waste, and the coordination of effort, we are, all of us, making enormous strides with every passing day. But back of that cooperative leadership that is showing itself so splendidly in every part of the country, there are two other vital reasons for the maintenance of the efforts of the churches and other non-governmental groups in every part of the land.
The first of these is that much as you and I strive for the broad principles of social justice, the actual application of these principles is of necessity an individual thing—a thing that touches individual lives and individual families. No governmental organization in all history has been able to keep the human touch to the same extent as church and private effort. Government can do a great many things better than private associations or citizens, but in the last analysis, success in this kind of personal work in which you are engaged depends upon personal contact between neighbor and neighbor.

The other reason lies in the fact that the people of the United States still recognize, and, I believe, recognize with a firmer faith than ever before, that spiritual values count in the long run more than material values. Those people in other lands, and I say this advisedly, those in other lands who have sought by edict or by law to eliminate the right of mankind to believe in God and to practice that belief, have, in every known case, discovered sooner or later that they are tilting in vain against an inherent, essential, undying quality, indeed necessity, of the human race—a quality and a necessity which in every century have proved an essential to permanent progress—and I speak of religion.

Clear thinking and earnest effort and sincere faith will result in thoroughgoing support throughout the whole Nation of efforts such as yours. The spirit of our people has not been blunted; it has not been daunted. It has come through the trials of these days unafraid. We have ventured and we have won; we shall venture further and we shall win again. Yes, the traditions of a great people have been enriched. In our measures of recovery and of relief we have preserved all that is best in our history and we are building thereon a new structure—strong and firm and permanent.

I can never express in words what the loyalty and trust of the Nation have meant to me. Not for a moment have I doubted that we would climb out of the valley of gloom. Always I have been certain that we would conquer, because the spirit of America springs from faith—faith in the beloved institutions of our land, and a true and abiding faith in the divine guidance of God.


2 St. Vincent de Paul (1581–1660) was a Catholic priest famous for his work with the poor.

3 Psalm 23:4: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”