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In the name of God most gracious and most merciful, I'm deeply humbled and honored to be here in celebration of the 75th birthday of Father Geno Baroni.

This is the month of Ramadan, this is the month of fasting for Muslims. It is also the 53rd month of reflecting. And it seems like being here today, a lot of things are all coming together in terms of reflection. I reflect upon the civil rights movement, I reflect upon being five years old and having our house firebombed by the Klan because my grandfather was active in the civil rights movement, registering African-Americans to vote. And the sensation of having my grandmother and my Auntie to throw their bodies over myself and my two-year-old brother.

I reflect upon also Geno, from the standpoint that I didn't know him intimately, but I knew his work, and I had two significant occasions to -- as we say in our urban vernacular -- check Geno out.

I think the first time was when I was on Fourteenth Street, coming up from Norfolk, Virginia to be with the student nonviolent coordinating committee, and I saw this white priest among all of these brothers in the 'hood, and I ask Kwame Ture, who was then called Stokely Carmichael, "who is this guy?"

And Kwame, he says, "that's Geno, the priest. He's cool." And I remember that. 54 And then I heard him speak at All Souls Church, and I heard him describe that part of faith is to use your faith to overcome your fears, as he was encouraging people to go south to deal with barbarity and dogs and the hoses, and actually the losses of lives that was actually taking place in the South. And I realized that Geno was reflecting what Paul Tillich, the Christian theologian would often say, is that one's faith is often defined by -- well, not often, but one's faith is defined by one's ultimate concern. What concerns you defines your faith.

So, reflecting on all of that and then looking at what was required to talk about -- and I, too, feel that I'm going to kind of just go with the flow -- but I think I just wanted to focus on the need to rebuild a new coalition across ethnic, religious, and the secular divide. And that was the aspect of Geno's life that I was most acquainted with, and I have to admit that I got to know more about him, not to himself but through my mentor, Monsignor Higgins, who often would talk about Geno's work. And then, as I became 55 and knew more about Geno's work and I would ask Monsignor Higgins, and he would give me some insight. But I wanted to focus on primarily Geno's building of coalitions, and the need to rebuild a new coalition.

If we examine that aspect of Geno's life, we can see that he worked to build a coalition that moved across diverse ethnic lines, and was also a critical mix of the secular along with the religious, and it produced social changes that were positive. But not only did they produce social changes that was positive, but it also politically codified it in the deepest fabrics of our nation, by making it law. In short, not only was desegregation and the denial of the right to vote important to Geno in terms of expressing it morally, but he was also deeply concerned that we would try to deal with it in terms of making sure that it was not only unacceptable morally, but it was also unacceptable, legally, by politically working to make a law.

Why is there a need for a new coalition? I'd like to discuss that briefly, and discuss some of what I see as impediments, and then 56 finally, maybe a few best practices, combined with the mission first, we need to build a new coalition, because the old one is no longer effective, it simply has collapsed. And I'm talking more specifically about the civil rights movement that kind of broadened its base, towards the end of Dr. King's life, to also deal with what we call the peace movement.

I think we also need to build a new coalition, because isn't it indeed sad that in America today, it takes a hurricane to remind us that we have racism, poverty, the elderly, the sick, and the vulnerable, what Jesus the Christ would refer to as the least of these. It takes the glare of a camera and a hurricane to make us see it in our nation.

We need a new coalition because as Bob said, we have over 40 million people in America who are working every day, but they don't have health insurance. They can't afford to get sick.

We have a criminal justice system where the rich get bailed and sail, and the poor, the black, the mentally challenged, get jailed 57 in hell. We need a new coalition.

We need a new coalition because the right for people to organize in the workplace is declining, much I think to the credit of labor unions in who haven't done the right things, but indeed, unions in America are declining. People are less interested in moving into unions, and perhaps a little bit later on we can talk about that. But indeed, we need to have a new coalition because the dignity of work is not respected. The Prophet Mohammed used to say, "pay the worker while the sweat is still wet on his brow." So we need a new coalition.

We need a new coalition also because the faith-based initiatives of this administration, the initiative seems to be more -- and I did go and visit John when he first went and moved into the office. The first thing that I noticed, that John was there. But beyond John being there, mostly everybody else he had surrounded himself with were people who were of a somewhat Christian right, evangelical bent.

And I told John, I said, "Don't they know 58 that God is an equal opportunity employer?"

(Laughter.)

But nevertheless, this faith-based initiative seems to be a cash cow of the Christian right, and another way to buy African American mega-church pastors into the Republican Party. I think Geno would be very offended with that, and the use of the faith-based initiative in that way.

Also, I think also we need to build a new coalition because civil liberties are on the demise. We have an executive branch of government that usurp liberties while frankly, in my humble opinion, a cowardly Congress fiddles like Nero, while liberties are being eroded everyday.

I think one of the things the Geno would point out in circumstances like this is that yes, we have checks and balances in the American system; we have indeed the executive branch, we have the legislative branch, and we have the judiciary branch. But Geno would point out to us that we have one other check and balance. It is the branch of the people. It is the people. 59 We need a new coalition because we are obsessed, and many

are using immigration as a whipping boy to whip up fear. We see even Lou Dobbs, every single night on CNN, talking over and over again, about these immigrants who are coming. This xenophobia that seems to permeate our society. How ironic, a nation of immigrants afraid of immigrants.

We need -- on a personal level -- a new coalition because personally, I'm tired of the double whammy. I had to deal with DWB and FWM; driving while black and flying while Muslim. So, we need a new coalition.

We need a new coalition in essence to deal with the trifecta of evil that Dr. King spoke so eloquently towards, and that is: racism, blind materialism, and militarism.

And on that note, we need a new coalition when we look at how our schools are crumbling, how we don't have the money to continue Pell grants, and we are raising the interest rate on student loans, and as I indicated earlier we've got over 40 million people don't have health insurance, yet we can spend billions -- billions of dollars, monthly. We can spend 60 billions of dollars to drop smart bombs on a dumb mission in Iraq." We need a new coalition.

Let's talk about some of the impediments -- or at least one or two of them -- that really face us, in terms of building this new coalition. I think one of the things that I greatly respected in the work of Geno was his validation and belief in authentic voices. That in order to build a coalition, you have to let the authentic voices move. You can't give empowerment, you have to -- at least -- try to assist in providing the tools, so that the authentic voices will empower themselves.

I think that this has been a long history in our country, in terms of dealing with that, in terms of building coalitions, whether that's the new coalition or the old, old coalition. Even the abolitionist movement, there was always this problem about authentic voices. Frederick Douglass, oh, the abolitionists loved him when he could come tell slave stories, and could tell how he whipped his master and escaped from slavery. But they didn't want him at the table in terms of the (unintelligible) process. And they didn't want him to talk about racism in the north, "Just talk about those bad people in the South."

And we see this still permeating -- it happens also in the labor movement. We see it currently even in the peace movement, that we alienate authentic voices. We don't want to bring about authentic voices. Geno wasn't afraid of authentic voices. I think one of the problems, one of the impediments is that often, when we put together some of these coalitions, they're often what we call the "illusion of inclusion," the touchy-feely, Shirley Maclaine, kumbaya syndrome, where we just all just want to get along, we are the world.

And so, as a result of that, I think that we really, really need to look at how we build coalitions where we can be intellectually and spiritually honest about who we are, what we are, and yet we can work together, find some way for working.

I often say, Bob, when I look at the interfaith way of building coalitions, there are two ways that don't work. One of the ways indeed is the strident model where people bring you around and they say they're gonna do interfaith, but in reality what they really want to do is enter you into faith, their faith, I don't care who it is.

That's a model that doesn't work because it often becomes what we call the "strident model," where people are clashing and fighting, and want to do one up, or "my faith is better than your faith."

Then we have what I referred to earlier as the, you know, Shirley Maclaine, touchy-feely, kumbaya, you know, everybody holding hands, there are no differences, we're all the same. Well, that's not true. It's not true at all. Certainly, Bob is a Trinitarian and I'm not. There's a difference here.

Certainly Bob and Karl believes in vicarious atonement, but as a Muslim that's not part of my faith tradition.

But yet, despite the fact -- well, you should be able to recognize these differences, but at the same time we have to look at the things that can join us together. Certainly, 63 in Christian and in the Jewish faith tradition, it says in the book of Amos, "Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream." In the Koran it says that, "God has set the scales of justice high in the firmament in order that human beings should not transgress. Therefore, establish just weights, and fall not short in the balance."

So, from the various different scriptures, even though there's some theological differences, it seems that the commonality here is that God calls us to social justice. In the book of Matthew, it says, you know, that Jesus the Christ is saying, "If you've done unto the least of these, you've done it unto me." In the Koran it says that basically, God does not take kindly to those who are neglectful of their prayers, who want to make prayers only to be seen of others, but won't provide the neighborly deeds. It's called "Ma'oun" (phonetic), the neighborly deeds.

So, even though I don't believe in original sin, and my Catholic -- and other 64 Christians, believe in original sin, I do know from my text, that I am required to deal with the poor, the indigent, the "miskeen" (phonetic) as it's called in Arabic, in the Koran. And that the Bible and the Torah requires it. So guess what, we're different theologically, but I think we can do some soup kitchens, we can do some food pantries, we can work together.

I think that was the spirit of Geno, that was the brilliance of what I knew about him, his ability to bring people together and to be honest about their differences, to speak with authentic voices about their differences, and yet, be able to work together for a positive result. And I think it's critically important.

I think you can highlight this whenever you look at the whole peace movement. The peace movement has always been, you know, somewhat tainted with the same thing that the abolitionist movement and other movements have been tainted with, and that is that there are a few what we call liberal elites who think they know best for everyone. And therefore, 65 the way they organize and the way they move -- I mean, we had 300,000 people on September the twenty-fourth in Washington D.C. to raise their voices against war. Yet, of that 300,000, maybe less than two percent of them were Hispanic or African-American. What's wrong with that picture, Geno would ask.

And what are we doing wrong that doesn't bring -- certainly you can pull the African-American community, they are opposed to the war. Because they know what it means for them in terms of their families, and how it impacts their lives. Latinos likewise. But yet

they're not there. There's something about, you know, the way we structure coalitions, you know, with sometimes what I call the elitist, you know, Father-knows-best mentality, that alienate authentic voices. And Geno was very good about dealing with that and putting his finger on it, and addressing it.

I think the other thing, too, is that being a voice, or a voice of opposition is important. But also, being an instrument of resistance is important. And there's a distinction. I use that in saying that unlike the Vietnam war, this war in Iraq, it didn't take seven years for the religious community to say that we were opposed to this war.

But you may have noticed that one of the things that was under-reported, almost virtually not reported, was the breadth and the wide aspect of the religious community opposed to the war. From the Pope all the way down to the denomination that the president belongs to himself, were opposed to the war. I think in retrospect the problem was that we were a voice of opposition, and we voiced our opposition to the war, but we did not give our resistance to the war.

And so I think that's a lesson to be learned, that being a voice of opposition is important, but as King has indicated, as Rosalee Park indicated, being an implement with that voice, of resistance, is critically important to get action.

Let me conclude by talking about perhaps maybe some best principles of how or what could take place in a new coalition, some of the things that we may need to do to do a new coalition.

One of the things that we do at the freedom foundation, as a Muslim, maybe about -- I would say roughly, two thirds of Muslim population are immigrants.

And so, for the last two years we've traveled to every mosque -- most of them -- across America, talking about civic empowerment, the American government; how does it work, how does it function, demystifying politics, talking about how you can build coalitions, and explaining that there's nothing bad about politics, it's nothing disrespectful to your faith tradition, and that you can maintain your religious integrity, and be involved in the political process. It's possible, despite what some extremists and idiots in my faith may say. But it is possible.

And to demystify politics by explaining that basically -- as we say in that 'hood, breaking it on down, that politics is more than the authoritative allocation of resources. It's really about who gets what, when, where, and how. And making it just that simple in terms of trying to reach out to people.

I think we need to replicate this more. I think we need to have, within the newly-arrived, and those who have been here in the immigrant population, more civic, what I would call community empowerment workshops, where the skills of government, government affairs, the skills of the media, the skills of outreach, how to build coalitions, what are the rules of engagement of building coalitions are done.

Today, we've trained over 4000, over 4000. But that's really a very small drop in the bucket compared to how many newly-arrived immigrants we have in this country, that need to be part of this new coalition.

And I say that because I crunched the numbers at Northern Virginia, and I realize that if Latino community and the Muslim community, just in Northern Virginia alone, would register themselves, were organized, and would be both registered, voter education, as well as voter mobilization, that they could be a pivotal player in the body politic of the state of Virginia.

Northern Virginia is always in play, and I've crunched the numbers and actually, if you get the Muslims and Hispanics working together and show them how to do that, they could virtually have influence over who's going to be the governor in the state of Virginia every four years, which means that you know, Virginia would have to reassess its positions about immigrants, and immigrant rights.

So I look at that, and I also think it's important that we have youth leadership mentoring programs in the ethnic communities. The idea of mentoring has been lost. We do what we call "creaming," we just take the ones who are already talented, who are at the top, who have had their -- and we just scrape that off. But we don't want to do the work, and churn down -- I'm a country boy, you know -- to get the butter.

So, I think that's really important. For me, I know that we weren't rich, but my political education was just a wealth of information and mentoring. I grew up in the church, I converted to Islam some 28 years ago. But in the church, we had a parallel universe. If there was a senior usher boy, there was a junior usher boy; senior choir, junior choir. Senior debating team, there was a junior debating team. Senior Civic league, we had a junior Civic league. If we had a board of trustees, we had a junior board of trustees.

And as a result of that, I grew up with the feeling that I was born to be a leader, and that my position, despite what they may say about the color of my skin and how they were treating me, my position in life was to be a headlight, not a taillight. My position in life was to be a thermostat, not a thermometer. But that came through a mentoring process in the civil rights movement that we've lost.

And so I think that it's important that we go back to the mentoring process. It's important that we make connections with our young people, and reach out. Because either we reach over, or we reach under, but we're not reaching out, and we're missing that connection. Makes me think about a young man who would paint fingernails black, and go out and kill someone, or Columbine, or even the youth in London who would strap a bomb to himself and blew himself up, and others. Where was outreach, and who was reaching out? That's the important thing, in terms of reaching out.

So I think that is so critically important. Oh, yes I know that each generation speaks a different language, you know. Now, you know, we have -- it confuses a lot of us because our children, if they say "bling-bling," it's not silverware falling on the table. Eminem is not chocolate candy. Fifty cent is not change you get from the 7-11. Usher is not gonna take you to a seat. And Little Kim is not an Asian restaurant.

(Laughter.)

And so they speak a different language. But the language that has never changed for youth is the need for someone to guide, the need for someone to care, and the need to have positive imprints and positive action. My grandmother used to always say that "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." So we need to look at that.

And let me just conclude by telling you the story, why we need a new coalition. We need a new coalition because of this thing I'm reminded of.

This young boy who was traveling in Europe -- American -- and I went past a pet store in the UK, and I saw this beautiful bird with gorgeous plumage, bright array of colors. It resembled a turkey, but he had never seen a turkey with this kind of plumage. And so he went in and he looked at the bird, and then he turned the price tag over, he went, "Boy, expensive."

And he asked the shop owner, why was the bird so expensive? And the shop owner explained. He said, "My dear young man, not only is this bird beautiful in its color, and not only is it expensive, but it can speak nine different languages."

And the boy was amazed. He signed over all of his traveler's checks, purchased the bird, crated it up, air cargo, sent it home to his mother with a note, "Dear mother, I'm sending you this miraculous bird. I'll be home soon."

Well, that was right around the end of summer. Well, as you know sometimes, men and women propose, but God dispose. And so he didn't go home at the appointed time that he was supposed to come home. Actually, he came home two days after that wonderful holiday of Thanksgiving. And when he arrived, he greeted his mother, he hugged her, and he was sitting -- he was explaining all of the wonderful things he had seen and done in Europe. And then finally, his curiosity got the best of him as he was sipping his mother's tea and eating her fruitcake. He says, "Mother, where's the bird, that wonderful bird? What do you think of the bird?"

In his mother looked at him in amazement and said, "Son, the bird was delicious." And he was horrified. But that he thought, maybe she's just joking.

He says, "Come on, Mom. Where's the bird?"

She said, "Son, I told you. The bird was the legends. We finished him one day after Thanksgiving, along with the pumpkin pie." ⁷⁴ And he couldn't believe it. He says, "Mom, not only was that bird beautiful and rare, but I paid an exorbitant price for that bird. And not only that, that bird could speak nine different languages."

And so she said, "Well Son, he should have said something."

(Laughter.)

What's my point? My point is this: is that if we don't build a new coalition, to speak truth to power, to address the things that we see; just like that bird, we will be eaten. We'll be eaten by the fearmongers, we'll be eaten by those who are intolerant of others. We'll be eaten by racism and all the other abnormalities that so concerned Geno in his lifetime.

I conclude by saying that Geno understood what Dr. King understood so well, and that is, silence can actually be betrayal. We have to speak up. We have to speak up, not only with our mouths, but with our actions. Rosa Parks spoke up. So I think that that is what Geno's legacy is all about, for me. The impact, you know, it's amazing that great men sometimes ⁷⁵don't realize the impact they have on others. I think Geno never knew me, and he probably never knew the impact that just his courage, his faith over fear and justice for all philosophy made in my life, so much that actually, if you look at the freedom foundation's slogan, it's "Faith over Fear," and "Justice for All." Thank you.

