

**Homily of Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State
Centenary of the Establishment of the Conference
of Bishops of the United States of America**

*Baltimore
Basilica of the Assumption
of the Blessed Virgin Mary
12 November 2017*

Your Eminences,
Your Excellencies,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As the Church in the United States celebrates the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of its Conference of Bishops, I have the honor to convey to all of you the Holy Father's prayerful good wishes and the assurance of his spiritual closeness and affection.

The readings of today's Mass are quite appropriate for this commemoration, for they speak of the gift of *divine wisdom*, which enables us not only to know God, but also to serve him by doing his will. The first reading reminds us that wisdom must constantly be *sought*, yet she readily reveals herself to those who look for her. It is that same divine wisdom, the gift of the Holy Spirit, which your assembly regularly implores to guide your deliberations and decisions in the service of the Gospel and the pastoral care of Christ's flock in this great nation.

Indeed, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops originated in a wise and Spirit-filled response to the immense human suffering and displacement brought about by the First World War. The American bishops created the National Catholic War Council not least in order to assist in the resettlement of so many families forced to leave their homes and come to the New World in search of security and a better life.

In the very changed circumstances of today, that mission remains timely, as the Church in your country seeks to bring not only material assistance but also the spiritual balm of *healing, comfort and hope* to

new waves of migrants and refugees who come knocking on America's door. In its subsequent development, your assembly, while never wavering in that commitment to Christian charity, has proved to be an effective means for coordinating the pastoral outreach and evangelical witness of the Church in America.

In today's Gospel, the wise virgins filled their lamps with oil in preparation for the coming of the bridegroom. I would like to draw on the symbolism of that *oil* in order to reflect with you on some of the present-day opportunities and challenges facing your Conference at the dawn of its second century. That oil, we know, symbolizes the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit, poured out upon the entire Church for her growth in unity and prophetic witness. In a special way, too, it was poured out upon each of you at your ordination, to be a source of interior wisdom and strength for your ministry as heralds of the Gospel and shepherds of God's holy people.

The oil with which the Lord asks us to fill our lamps is, above all, purity, the *purity of heart* that is the fruit of authentic personal *conversion*. Like the olives that must be crushed to yield that oil, all those things in our lives that stand in the way of our growth in Christ – our egos, our spiritual worldliness, our daily temptations and our desire for human respect – must be crushed by the daily experience of prayer, humility, self-denial and pastoral charity. Only in this way, will they generate the “fuel” that will allow the fire of God's love to purify hearts, enlighten minds and inspire you, as a body, to make wise decisions, motivated by profound consensus and free of all partisan spirit, for the good of the Church in this country.

That oil is also *spiritual joy*, the joy of the Gospel – *Evangelii gaudium* – that the Church is called to proclaim before the world. Ultimately, it is a joy grounded in our hope in the Lord's victory over death and the promise of our own resurrection. Saint Paul reminds us of this in today's second reading. In an age increasingly marked by secularization, materialism and a coarsening of human relations, an essential aspect of your task as pastors of the Church in America is to propose that hope, in season and out of season, trusting in its power to attract minds and hearts to the truth of Christ.

The Catholic community in this nation, in the vast network of its parishes and educational, healthcare and charitable institutions, is challenged to propose in an ever more vital way the wisdom of the Gospel, which alone brings true joy and satisfies the deepest longings of the human heart. To meet this challenge, you, as a body, have undertaken far-sighted initiatives such as the recent Convocation of Catholic Leaders and the series of National *Encuentros* aimed at encouraging dialogue and cooperation at every level of the life of the Church in the United States. In this way, you are seeking to foster that heightened sense of missionary discipleship that Pope Francis considers the heart of the new evangelization. Allow me to cite here directly the Holy Father, where, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, he says that he dreams of a "missionary option", "that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation" (n. 27). If the whole Church takes up this missionary impulse, she has to go forth to everyone without exception (cfr. N. 48). "Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ" (n. 49). He is necessary for us - as Blessed Paul VI said - is necessary for the man of today, is necessary for today's world. And the one who is fortunate enough to meet him, who accepts his salvation is "set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 1).

As you look to the future, you are called to discern ever more creative ways to *anoint* all God's people with the oil of *wisdom and strength* needed to embrace their prophetic mission as witnesses of evangelical joy and hope in a broken world.

The oil in the lamps of the wise virgins likewise symbolizes *the balm of healing, reconciliation and peace*. In the century prior to the founding of your Conference, the great challenge facing the Church in this country was to foster communion in an immigrant Church, to integrate a diversity of peoples, languages and cultures in the one faith, and to inculcate a sense of responsible citizenship and concern for the common good. Today too, the urgent need to welcome and integrate new waves of immigrants continues unabated. At the same time, the Catholic community is called, under your guidance, to work for an ever more just and inclusive society by dispelling the shadows of

polarization, divisiveness and societal breakdown by the pure light of the Gospel.

Here I cannot fail to mention the responsible contributions made by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to the discussion of important social issues and political debates, above all when these involve the defense of moral values and the rights of the poor, the elderly, the vulnerable and those who have no voice. I think in particular of the outstanding witness that the Church in this country has made to defending the right to life of the unborn, but also, in more recent times, to its efforts to ensure due protection for the family and access to affordable health care. You have done this not only by engaging in policy debates in your own country, but also by assisting international processes of dialogue and peacemaking, and by providing much-needed humanitarian aid to peoples beset by war and civil conflict. In this process of accompaniment, may you continue to exercise your prophetic office by bringing the *balm of mercy* to discussions that all too often take refuge in policies and statistics, while ignoring the faces and needs of real people.

Dear brother bishops, dear brothers and sisters:

In this Holy Eucharist, we give thanks for the abundant gifts that the Holy Spirit has bestowed on the Church in this country through the work of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. As your assembly embarks upon its second century of life, let us all pray for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit's gifts, so that, individually and collegially, you may keep the lamp of faith burning brightly. As wise and prudent stewards of the mysteries of God, may you guide the faithful entrusted to your care on the paths of life and history, until at last we meet the Lord and enter into his joy, in the eternal wedding feast of heaven, together with Mary, the Mother of God and our Mother, to whom we entrust your Episcopal Conference in this church dedicated to her, and to all the saints. Amen.