

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
TO THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
2017 FALL GENERAL ASSEMBLY
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND
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Dear Brothers in Christ,

I am very happy to be with you here in Baltimore. In a special way, I wish to thank Cardinal DiNardo, the President of the Episcopal Conference, as well as Monsignor Bransfield and the Staff of the USCCB, for the opportunity to address you. I assure you of the Holy Father's closeness, prayers, and gratitude for your ministry as you celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the episcopal conference and engage in the mission of evangelization.

On his recent trip to Colombia, while meeting with the executive committee of CELAM, Pope Francis commented:

The essential things in life and in the Church are never written in stone, but remain a living legacy. It is all too easy to turn them into memories and anniversaries to be celebrated: fifty years since Medellín, twenty since *Ecclesia in America*, ten since Aparecida! Something more is required: by cherishing the richness of this patrimony (*pater/munus*) and allowing it to flourish, we exercise the *munus* of our episcopal paternity towards the Church in our continent. (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF CELAM, 7 SEPTEMBER 2017)

In celebrating one hundred years of communion as an episcopal conference, we rejoice not only in what has been accomplished, but also that the Heavenly Father has given you an opportunity to be in a permanent state of mission as spiritual fathers of the people of this land. In that same address, the Holy Father reminded the bishops that their mission requires passion, saying:

“We need to have the passion of young lovers and wise elders, a passion that turns ideas into viable utopias, a passion for the work of our hands, a passion that makes us constant pilgrims in our Churches. ... I ask you for passion, the passion of evangelization.” (IBID.)

What are we as bishops truly passionate about? I think this is a fundamental question so that the memory of the illustrious past of your conference gives rise to a

future with Christ the Lord at the center of your ministry and the Church. At the Convocation of Catholic Leaders, Cardinal Tobin warned of a great threat to evangelization, namely spiritual slothfulness, citing *Evangelii Gaudium* 83:

And so, the biggest threat of all gradually takes shape: “the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which all appears to proceed normally, while in reality faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness.” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 83)

What are some things about which we should be passionate? I would like to speak to you about three: our youth; the mission of evangelization; and the Lord Himself.

Our Youth

One year ago, I spoke about the importance of young people in the Church. The upcoming Synod on Youth provides an opportunity to listen to our young people, to be with them, to learn from them, and to help them discover the path the Lord has chosen for them. Bishop Caggiano and Archbishop Chaput offered a joint statement encouraging you along these lines. Pastors, parents, and teachers know the difficulties of transmitting the faith in our day, which is not so much “an age of change as a change of age.” Young people too struggle, not only with existential questions, but also with practical problems, like finding work, but also spiritual problems like having a sense of belonging to a community of faith in a period of increasing secularization.

In July, at the Convocation of Catholic Leaders, Hosffman Ospino presented the stark reality:

In 1991 about 3 percent of the U.S. Population self-identified as non-religiously affiliated or “nones.” Today, 26 years later, about 25 percent of all people in our country self-identify as such. The trend is very clear. We know that about 20 million people in our country who were born and raised Catholic do not self-identify as such anymore. It is likely that many of them, especially those who are young, joined the ranks of the nones. (HOSFFMAN OSPINO, “KEYNOTE ADDRESS,” CONVOCATION OF CATHOLIC LEADERS, ORLANDO, JULY 2, 2017, IN *ORIGINS* 47/11 (JULY 20, 2017) 165.)

Bishop Barron pointed out that nearly fifty-percent of Catholics under age 30 identify as “nones”. And what of the nearly 14 million Hispanics born and raised

Catholic who are here but also have become “nones”? With six Catholics leaving the Church for one who enters, perhaps we could become discouraged; however, we are a people of hope. Our hope is principally in the Lord and in the Holy Spirit.

Are we passionate about our youth? If we are, then this means being willing and open to accompanying them personally, as spiritual fathers, even if this makes demands on our time and energy. A passion, born out of love, also means providing sound catechesis and formation, so that amid the pressures of a secular culture, they can make wise choices that lead to authentic human flourishing. Love, rooted in the truth, demands that we contribute something to the culture – something of the true, the good, and the beautiful – that will support them in their journey. The beauty of Catholicism – in art, architecture, music, and in its liturgical, spiritual and intellectual tradition – cannot be hidden but must be re-proposed.

In presenting the Truth – that is the person of Christ – do we offer them an attractive image of the Lord and His Bride the Church or an image of a bureaucracy? Investing in our youth, especially with priestly, pastoral care, is also important, so that young people are equipped to defend the reasonableness of faith in a culture dominated by the ideology of scientism. Offering an intelligent and persuasive case for God, especially in Catholic high schools, universities, and campus ministries, can serve as a remedy for and defense of our young people. This investment of our time, resources, and our best personnel will be a tangible way of showing that we have a passion for the young, not merely as the future of the Church but as an integral part of the Family of God.

The goodness of our Catholic faith in action offers credible witness to our young people. In particular, I want to commend you for your defense of the human person, who, at the dawn of creation, when looking upon what He had made, God declared to be “very good.” Your defense of human life, especially the unborn is most commendable, but I am pleased also that your conference has witnessed to the dignity of the person also in its defense of migrants and refugees. More recently, in the midst of racial tensions following the events of Charlottesville, your strong leadership sends a message to a young people of a Church that is prophetic and filled with good-hearted people of every race and tribe! There is a goodness in the Catholic people of this country, seen in their charity, coming to the aid of the victims of the recent hurricanes and wildfires.

While being realistic about the changing demographics and declining numbers, let us be filled with a sense of urgency, the same urgency for

evangelization that the Apostles had when the Holy Spirit descended on them at Pentecost. This can be a *Kairos* moment for the Church in America.

The Mission of Evangelization

A second thing to be passionate about is the mission of evangelization. The Holy Father wants us to have the “passion of evangelization.” At the Convocation of Catholic Leaders, Cardinal Wuerl highlighted four characteristics of a new evangelist: boldness, connectedness, urgency, and joy. The statistics alone should give us a sense of urgency, but is our urgency, motivated by fear and loss, or is it fueled by the joy of sharing the Gospel?

I offer you the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, patroness of your country, as someone who went forth on mission with a sense of urgency and joy. Mary, having received the joyful message of Gabriel and having conceived by the Holy Spirit, could not keep her joy to herself. Similarly, we cannot keep the joy of Christ to ourselves. The mystery of the Visitation points to an aspect of missionary discipleship: building a culture of encounter.

Last year, the Pope sent you a video message, saying:

“Our great challenge is to create a culture of encounter, which encourages individuals and groups to share the richness of our traditions and experiences, to break down walls and to build bridges. The Church in America, as elsewhere, is called to ‘go out’ from its comfort zone and to be a leaven of communion. Communion among ourselves, with our fellow Christians, and with all who seek a future of hope. We need to become ever more fully a community of missionary disciples, filled with love of the Lord Jesus and enthusiasm for the spread of the Gospel.” (VIDEO MESSAGE TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE USCCB, 14-17 NOVEMBER 2016)

This idea of “going out” and being a missionary disciple is seen concretely in the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She went forth, with her Child in the womb, to encounter her cousin Elizabeth. What was the result of this encounter? Joy! The Mother of God was passionate about bring her Son to the world.

Having a clear sense of mission – proposing the person of Christ – will be critical. Many members of the flock, including the young, and those who do not know Christ, before substantial catechesis and formation can occur, need to hear the

basic kerygma – the beautiful story of the death and resurrection of the Lord and the mercy and the life He offers.

In just a few weeks, the Trinity Dome of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception will be dedicated. There we find so many saints – especially those who labored in this country – who had a passion for evangelization. The legacy of Mother Cabrini, the first American citizen to be canonized, reminds us of the westward movement of the Church and her passion for immigrants. Archbishop Gomez never ceases to remind us of Saint Junipero Serra, whom the Holy Father canonized on American soil and proposed as a model for evangelization. Junipero was tireless as he built the California missions – one after another as he went forth.

The faith can take root here in the United States. It was this land that gave rise to Blessed Stanley Rother, who was so passionate about his people and his mission to Guatemala, even in this face of grave danger, that he heroically gave his life for it, when he could have easily abandoned his mission or stayed where it is secure. His witness is a timely reminder to be bold. The Holy Father reminds us that we need to be in a *permanent state of mission*, which really means:

“To go forth to meet without keeping a safe distance; to take rest without being idle; to touch others without fear. It is a matter of working day by day in the *fields*, where God’s people, entrusted to your care, live their lives. We cannot let ourselves be paralyzed by our air-conditioned offices, statistics and our strategies.” (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF CELAM, 7 SEPTEMBER 2017)

This permanent state of mission means going to the peripheries – the physical and existential peripheries. I place before you the example of one who was not a foreign missionary but a simple friar – Solanus Casey, who will be beatified this weekend. He was a porter, but he made time for people. He listened to their problems, and he comforted the sick with great compassion. He was not asked to carry out a great mission in the eyes of the world, but day and night, that is, permanently, his love for the Lord and his people, brought light to those in darkness.

Being in a permanent state of mission means recognizing that evangelization is not about us. It is about Christ who lives and works in his disciples and who is passionately in love with His flock. Your witness of going forth will send a powerful message to the flock, especially to the young, that the Church, is not self-referential, but is there for them!

While there is the temptation to be discouraged by demographic change or declining numbers, take courage. There are signs of growth in the Church in the South and West. I cannot tell you how much joy I felt to see the new cathedral in Raleigh filled to capacity as it was dedicated. The presence of so many Hispanics and Latinos there was also encouraging; there was a sense of unity of faith and an encounter of cultures, giving rise to a vibrant church. The experience also confirmed for me the importance of the Fifth National Encuentro, whose preparation is already underway, as offering an opportunity for authentic renewal for the mission of evangelization. There are signs of hope – of growth – of a new springtime for evangelization. I repeat, this can be a *Kairos* moment for the Church in America.

The Person of Jesus

The fruitfulness of this springtime will depend on our connection with Jesus. Although we are pastors, we are first disciples and need to learn from the Divine Master. Without a profound and renewed relationship with Christ, the necessary conversion for evangelization will not occur. As shepherds, we set the example for our local churches with respect to prayer and by our personal relationship with Jesus. The Holy Father said it directly: “To pray and to foster our relationship with Him: these are the most essential and urgent activities to be carried out in our pastoral ministry.” (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF CELAM, 7 SEPTEMBER 2017)

Like many parish priests, we lament that administrative matters demand a significant amount of time and attention. Seemingly, there is always one more task to be done. There is a risk of becoming a functionary or a manager, but Christ calls his disciples to “come away to a lonely place” (cf. Matthew 6:31) to pray. The need for silence, solitude, recollection and contemplation could not be greater as an antidote to excessive busyness and the frenetic pace of life.

The time spent in prayer and adoration can renew us for the work of evangelization. In prayer, we encounter Jesus and His Spirit, who refreshes us. Friendship with Christ provides us with consolation and encouragement amid failures and successes. In prayer, we discern and learn from Him the path that leads to life – for us and for our flock. In Him, we find our true friend who does not abandon us, so that when we set out on mission, we do so with Him and in Him. By remaining in Him, we remain in a permanent state of mission.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you. (John 20:21) We are called first to be with Jesus and then He sends us on mission to meet the people – to draw close to

them, to be with them, and to listen to them. On mission, we encounter the flock and can speak with them with the gentleness of Jesus, guided by the Holy Spirit, who gives us strength and wisdom to know what to say and do in the best possible way. In going on mission with Jesus, we realize that He is with us – in His meekness and in His power – to offer healing, mercy, and salvation.

To perform missionary tasks without first nurturing our relationship with Him in prayer would be like going for a long drive without much fuel. Indeed, we must empty ourselves of the many distractions of modern life to make room for Christ and the Spirit in the depths of our being. Each one of us here must ask Himself: Am I really passionate about Jesus? Do I convey that enthusiasm for the Lord to the people? Does my passion for the Lord give me a passion for the flock?

It would be easy in the face of the demographic changes, the increasing secularism, the dictatorship of relativism, and simply the burdens of office to become discouraged. Do not be discouraged! It is precisely in walking with Christ daily, including along the path that leads to the Cross, that your journey and your ministry will bear fruit.

The Church in this country flourished through the missionary and apostolic zeal – the zeal for Christ, His Kingdom, and the Gospel – of the Spanish missionaries, the French Jesuit Explorers, and the early bishops, from Bishop Carroll to Bishops Flaget and Fenwick and so many others, who labored for their flocks in the wilderness.

Today's wilderness presents many challenges but also the opportunity for adventure – the adventure of faith. The mission will be successful only if we have the courage to be adventurous – to be bold – trusting that the Lord will never abandon us; rather He goes with us. For this reason, rather than succumb to discouragement, we have every reason to be filled with hope and joy – for Christ is in our midst!

Your episcopal conference celebrates its one hundredth anniversary. It is a great milestone. Once more, I repeat: this can be a *Kairos* moment for the Church in America. Together with Christ and His Mother, let us look forward passionately to the bright promise that lies ahead on the new frontier of faith!