

Presidential Address

My dear brother bishops, priests, religious, and all the faithful who may be listening: the peace of Christ be with you always. Recently, in my study time, I have been reading from the book of Sirach and these words jumped out: “speak concisely; say much in few words.” I will try to be appropriately short and concise.

“Before you speak, learn,” Sirach says. Traveling on your behalf these past three years, it was a privilege to learn from so many people along the way. Allow me to share just a few of their stories.

Visiting the border detention centers, I remember the many hand-drawn pictures of Jesus or Mary in the children’s rooms and the long lines for confession before Mass. Separated from their families, I met dozens of children who called upon their Catholic faith and the firm knowledge that Christ and His Church would be present with them. Along with my brother bishops, we went because Jesus was already there. We followed our shepherd. I invite everyone who may hear this to share our journey of solidarity with migrants and refugees. May we accompany our sisters and brothers as Jesus accompanies us in our own struggles.

Through the cry of a baby in her mother’s arms, I met dozens of respite center volunteers at the border. Without their generous response, that child might not have gotten the medicine she needed for her fever. They are doing God’s work.

So are the people I’ve met in pregnancy centers across the country. They are working hard to make abortion an unnecessary choice by providing support and child-care options for expectant mothers. Public policy advocates are fighting for health care that is comprehensive enough to nurture every child’s right to life. If you are a mother feeling alone and considering abortion, please know that if you call one of our churches, a compassionate voice will answer and help

identify resources. The continued fight to defend unborn children is one of the most significant things we do. And it will remain so as long as the most innocent lives are left unprotected.

My life is also forever changed by meeting with survivors of abuse. When too many within the Church sought to keep them in the darkness, they refused to be relegated to the shadows. Their witness brought help to countless fellow survivors. It fueled the resolve of my brother bishops to respond with pastoral support and prevention programs. Background checks, safe environment training, expert review boards, and zero tolerance policies are in place and working -- not in spite our past failures but rather because of them. By sharing their pain, survivors empowered us with the knowledge needed to respond. And Pope Francis has ushered in a new era of bishop accountability with a worldwide standard for investigating wrongdoing, protecting whistleblowers, and serving survivors.

We have learned how we must strive for justice for the victims of sexual abuse. We must never stop striving for this justice and working unceasingly to prevent any future abuse from happening. The measures we approved last June are a beginning of this renewed striving, but they are only a beginning – more needs to and will be done. Sirach reminds us, “if you strive after justice, you will attain it...”

During these difficult times within our own Church, we must continue to strive for justice – for relationships that are ordered in the right way – that is, towards the salvation of souls, including our own. As our Holy Father has said so well and so often, one of those areas we need to strive to correct is clericalism. We cannot permit anyone who is ordained to act as if he is lord and master over others. The privilege of a cleric is to be a humble servant to all. Justice demands that those who are shepherds should lead from in front, as courage requires, and from behind, as humility requires, going to those who are lost. A renewed impetus towards evangelization must and will require an intensified sense of missionary discipleship, and this must begin with ourselves as bishops and with our priests.

To be on mission with the people of God is a great blessing. One of the other marvelous moments I will carry with me is the joy and laughter shared with the young people in small groups at the V Encuentro. They are the vibrant present and future of our faith. They make us aware of God's great love poured out on the Church. What we learned from these young people, and they from one another, is bringing new life to parishes throughout the country. At the Convocation the year before, leaders throughout the Church had a similar encounter with the Holy Spirit.

There is the good advice of St. Augustine as he preached on the Gospel of St. John. "Our present culture is difficult, it is filled with temptations, one must not exult in prosperity nor be broken by adversity." My service as president has been a continual reminder that, indeed, "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

Our present culture can seem overtaken by various ideological or political divisions. Civil dialogue has been replaced by coarse rhetoric. As followers of Christ, let us light a different path. Follow a simple truth: "God is always courteous." Let us be courteous.

It has been an honor to serve you, even in the difficult times. I now look to us all that we will continue to accompany the people of God, as Pope Francis has taught us, and be especially mindful of the impact we have on those less fortunate. The good Earth, our common home, calls for our stewardship. May the care we show each other and our common home always reflect the joy we share by living as sisters and brothers in Christ.

May God bless you and our work together this week.

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