

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
TO THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
2018 SPRING GENERAL ASSEMBLY
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA
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Dear Brothers in Christ,

I am very happy to be with you here in Fort Lauderdale. 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 to the flock here in the United States.

Last November, I reflected on the "opportunity to be in a permanent state of mission as spiritual fathers of the people of this land" by being passionate about our young people, about evangelization and, above all, about Christ, the source of our holiness and our ministry. Spiritual fatherhood and effective evangelization require listening.

Pope Francis writes:

We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken the yearning of the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives. (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 171)

I sincerely believe that it is necessary to listen: to our young people in view of the upcoming Synod; to the emerging Hispanic and Latino population as the Fifth National Encuentro reaches a crescendo with the national gathering in September; and to the words of the Holy Father in his recent Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*.

Listening to our Youth

As I previously mentioned to you, young people need to be a priority for the Church in the United States, not just for the future of the Church. Even now, they are in our midst – the millennials, the “nones”, our seminarians and others. We need to listen attentively to their voices, which call for a real encounter with Christ; a welcoming community in which they have a sense of belonging; authorities who will accompany them and help them discover what truly interests and attracts them; and an openness to their contributions in the life of the Church and the world.

First, young people express a desire for a personal, living encounter with Christ rather than a faith reduced to teaching and moralism. An American delegate to the recent pre-Synod, Katie Prejean McGrady, said, referring to the disaffiliation of young people from the Church, that many Catholics from her generation were catechized in a way that merely presented “bullet points to learn or these things to do”, rather than integrating them within the context of a relationship with Christ, a relationship which is more easily built by “having companions on the journey.”

Listening to her, I believe that what many young people desire is not merely Catholic content but holistic formation. They want the Church to facilitate their encounter with Christ, provoking within them a question: “What interests me in life?” Does their interest in Christ lead to works of justice and mercy, helping them live life and engage reality with great intensity, while loving their neighbor?

Second, young people want to engage reality, but they do not want to do so alone. They are searching for a stronger sense of belonging – for communion with others, for “companions on the journey.” The United States is profoundly affected by globalization, new technologies and social media, the great movement of peoples, including new immigrants, and a loss of a Christian anthropology and stable family bonds. At times, the culture, marked by an individualism which substitutes competition for solidarity, contributes to a sense of loneliness and insecurity.

The pre-synodal document also voices the anxiety of the young with respect to employment, mental illness, the effects of media, and pornography use. To that, we might add the issues of opioid addiction and racism. In this cultural context, which many young people find dissatisfying, could we propose that there is value, not merely in doing things and productivity, but in simply being with others, living in communion with them, in the Church? Practical efforts to make parishes more welcoming and supportive might create the environment for young people to feel that the Church is where they belong, that they are truly part of the Family of God.

Third, the young are looking for someone with authority to accompany them. The pre-synodal document has been criticized as a manifestation of the weak faith of young people or as a wish list of what young people want rather than what they need. I think it is an honest expression of the reality of young people, which includes their frustration with institutional bureaucracy and the unwillingness of others to take them seriously.

The pre-synodal document may not tell us what we want to hear. In that regard, we must ask: Why is there such a gap between what we offer and what they hear and receive? The starting point is not an argument about what they should believe but rather is an awareness that the young person must follow a path just as we had to. It is true that not everything they want is truly what they need. In the process of accompaniment, we listen and offer our experience and wisdom, attracting them by our fidelity and the witness of our lives.

Naturally, young people will be critical and ask questions. For our part, we need to adhere more faithfully to the Tradition, against which they can, through experience and their encounter with us, test the coherence of the Catholic Faith and verify its truths through reason, faith, and their encounter with Christ. Thus, they will learn to accept responsibility, use their freedom, and become protagonists in their future.

As bishops, we must use our authority wisely to mediate the Presence of the One from whom we have our authority. As spiritual fathers, we exercise our paternity helping them discern their true good as we accompany them, listening to and taking them seriously. This process demands time, effort and patience, but the investment is worth it.

Fourth, the proposal of the Catholic Faith must be attractive. This is God's method: He chooses a person or persons to attract others. We invite the young to follow, even if they are drawn to God along a path that is different from our own, promising them that they too will experience the positive change in their lives that we have had in knowing Christ intimately. Discipleship is a path for them to discover that God's promises are true and that this way of life is fulfilling. Our proposal of faith, by facilitating the encounter with Christ, must lead young people to the beautiful, the true, and the good – to the transcendent dimensions of life and eternity. Otherwise, what we offer will leave them – as the proposals of the world marked by selfishness and relativism leave them – disillusioned.

The Synod on Youth affords an opportunity to examine whether we have done something in our dioceses to facilitate the encounter with Christ. The Synod is a way of re-examining our methods, programs, and use of media to engage our youth, but, above all, for evaluating the quality and the capacity of our communities, parishes, movements, and schools to attract young people to Christ.

Fifth, the Youth Synod is an occasion to be innovative in creating ways for young people to contribute something to the Church instead of having them leave because there is no room for them. For example, Brother Javier Hansen, another American delegate at the Pre-Synod, suggested that something like the Pre-Synodal Meeting could be held in each diocese to create greater communication between members of the Church. If the young want the Church to be present outside of the church buildings, then we must reflect on how to do that. The response includes animating the laity, including their peers, to be a leaven in the world and in the workplace, as the laity represent the Church, making Christ present, in those places where the young live.

I am confident that as spiritual fathers, you will rise to meet these challenges, not only for the good of young people, but for your local churches.

Listening to the Hispanic and Latino community

There is also an ongoing need to listen to the voices of the emerging Hispanic and Latino population in the United States. Nearly 40% of the Church in this country identifies as Hispanic or Latino; more than half of young Catholics are Hispanic or Latino. The process of the Fifth National Encuentro has been, is, and, God-willing, will be a moment of grace for the Church in the United States.

The preparation and process of the Encuentro, in anticipation of the national meeting in September in Texas, has helped identify the contribution that Latino Catholics can make to the church in the United States and has given vitality to the process of the New Evangelization. I have witnessed the dynamism of these efforts, yours and those of the clergy, religious, and especially the laity, firsthand in Florida and in Brooklyn, and next week I will go to Albany for the New York Encuentro.

The local and regional gatherings of the Encuentro have afforded an opportunity to listen to people – men and women of all ages – at the grassroots to hear their concerns, their hopes and dreams. The process has opened our ears to voices of those at the peripheries, voices that we may not have otherwise heard. It allowed people from different countries and cultures to express themselves – not

only their concerns but also their faith – in their own words. While these efforts are leading to the national gathering, they are the beginning of a new phase in the transformation and renewal of the Church in the United States.

The Encuentro process has helped us to identify not only pastoral priorities but also leaders within the Hispanic community for our parishes and churches. These leaders must now be supported and sustained so that they may continue to bring the voices of those at the margins to their priests and bishops and to society at large. The Holy Father wants us to be a synodal Church and this involves the institutional Church listening evermore attentively to the voices of the flock.

The voices of those at the peripheries among the Hispanic/Latino population are important for another reason: they are voices that can announce the Gospel as part of the new evangelization. The Holy Father points out that these members of the flock often preserve and transmit the faith through their popular spirituality and devotion, enriching the whole Church. The devotional life, processions, music and art can convey the mysteries of the faith and attract others through beauty to the Transcendent. In this way, they live as disciples in a permanent state of mission.

The Encuentro, in conjunction with the Youth Synod, offers a chance to re-examine strategies for cultivating priestly and religious vocations among Hispanic youth. How can it be that when the majority of young Catholics in the United States is now Hispanic or Latino, there are so few seminarians, priests and religious of Hispanic descent? Attracting, nurturing, and supporting vocational discernment and outreach is essential for the vitality of the Church in the United States.

In attending various regional Encuentros, I listened. What I heard was the cry of the people – of Hispanics – for a Church to be more welcoming, more grateful for their many gifts, and even more supportive of them in their situations of fear and hopelessness. It is a cry of those hungering for a deeper relationship with God and the Virgin, to whom they desire to be close. I also listened to the voices of non-Hispanics who said that they realized the importance of the Encuentro for the good of the whole Church. While the National Encuentro in September may serve as a point of arrival, under your leadership, it may also prove to be a promising point of departure for the Church in the United States to be in a permanent state of mission. Guided by the Spirit of God, the Fifth National Encuentro should have a lasting impact on the future of the Church in this country.

Listening to the Pope: Gaudete et Exsultate

We also need to listen to the Holy Father. The Holy Father has issued three Apostolic Exhortations: *The Joy of the Gospel*; *the Joy of Love*; and now, *Gaudete et Exsultate – Rejoice and be glad!* – on the universal call to holiness. Pope Francis wants us to be joyful witnesses as together we strive for holiness, which is the lifeblood of the New Evangelization. The Pope reminds us that

... “it has pleased God to make men and women holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather as a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness.”
(Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018, 6)

The third chapter of the exhortation calls us to live the Beatitudes and to serve Christ in the least of our brothers and sisters. In chapter four, within the framework of holiness offered by the Beatitudes and Matthew 25, Pope Francis mentions signs that should accompany disciples on the path of holiness: perseverance, patience and meekness; joy and a sense of humor; boldness and passion; communal life; and, constancy in prayer. How present are these in the life of our local churches?

I think it is particularly important to listen to what the Holy Father says in the second chapter, where he addresses two threats to holiness: Pelagianism and Gnosticism. The Holy Father already warned of them in *Lumen Fidei* (47), in *Evangelii Gaudium* (93-94) in addressing spiritual worldliness, and in an address to the Italian Church in November 2015 (cf. Pope Francis, “Address at the Meeting with participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church,” Firenze, 10 November 2015).

The recent letter *Placuit Deo* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith described them this way:

A new form of Pelagianism is spreading in our days, one in which the individual, understood to be radically autonomous, presumes to save oneself, without recognizing that, at the deepest level of being, he or she derives from God and from others. According to this way of thinking, salvation depends on the strength of the individual or purely human structures, which are incapable of welcoming the newness of the Spirit of God. On the other hand, a new form of Gnosticism puts forward a model of salvation that is merely interior, closed off in subjectivism. In this model, salvation consists in elevating oneself with the intellect beyond “the flesh of Jesus toward the mysteries of the unknown divinity.” It presumes to liberate the human person and body

from the material universe, in which traces of the provident hand of the Creator are no longer found..." (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Placuit Deo*, 22 February 2018)

In chapter two of *Gaudete et Exsultate*, the Holy Father again examines these enemies of holiness, calling us to exercise spiritual paternity and vigilance. We do so by being a Church which invites people, particularly the young, to experience the power of God's grace, mercy, and love. We can also be a humble Church that, following the example of the Virgin Mary, is docile to the Holy Spirit and serves the human realities of our flock through our personal and spiritual closeness.

A prayerful re-reading of the Holy Father's words and a careful discernment can help us discover the ways of helping the flock in the United States overcome these challenges and so appreciate what it means to live, by grace, in the freedom of the children of God. Pope Francis wants us to share this message with our people:

Do not be afraid of holiness. It will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self. To depend on God sets us free from every form of enslavement and leads us to recognize our dignity. (Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 32)

Christianity lives because of its attractiveness and its promise of freedom and dignity. Authentically-lived, it draws others into an encounter that changes lives, opens new horizons, and leads to joy in the discovery of the beautiful, the true, and the good, which find their meaning in the Triune God, who is forever to be adored.