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Notre Dame University  
*Sacred Heart Basilica*

Catholic Cultural Diversity Network Convocation

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*Archbishop of Atlanta*

The Cable History Channel is currently airing a 12 episode series program entitled: *America The Story of Us* on Sunday evenings. Thus far, personally I have found it to be a fascinating program based upon the parts that I have seen. The series uses many of the wonders of modern day cinematography and a first-class cast of actors and commentators who provide an artistic expression of the enthralling topic of the

development and triumph of our common American political legacy.

As the actors and televised scenes tell the narrative of how we became and thrived as a nation, the viewer will find a great many things of which we all ought to be proud of in the wonderful historical heritage of our nation. There are to be sure many other heartrending chapters of our history that are and will be portrayed in future episodes that remind us of the ongoing struggles for justice and equality that still continue to be unfulfilled and are as yet unfinished.

Since the United States of America is a nation comprised of so many peoples of different races and cultures, each representing various economic conditions, diverse sociological categories and ethnic groups, there is always the temptation to draw too close a parallel of our national political struggle for unity in this great country with the challenges that have always faced our Catholic Church – another community which is far older and much richer in diversity and variety of peoples. Because in spite of some obvious similarities there are huge differences between the unity that we struggle to maintain as a nation and the Oneness that is the heritage and indeed a mark of the Catholic Church.

The current conflicts and wrangling around the question of immigration that have long been simmering and have recently flared up are only the latest expression of how this great country of ours continues to struggle with maintaining our national identity and yet continuing our legacy of welcoming the most recent peoples who come to our shores seeking the very same promises that brought countless millions of others here before them. The rhetoric can become hyper-exaggerated and often mean-spirited as conflicting opinions on the topic of immigration face off in this vitally important social concern.

Some people have warned that our very future as a nation is at stake if we don't defend our borders. Some have suggested that our economic stability will be compromised without more stringent laws to control the numbers of immigrants who come to our nation. Too often, the language employed is only a poorly veiled disguise for xenophobia and racism. We do face significant challenges and we need to take them seriously – but our nation has faced other such moments before – and the series highlights some of these most difficult moments in the history of this great land.

Yet our efforts at national unity often depend upon bringing peoples' diversity into something of an artificial harmony that seeks to minimize the uniqueness and distinctiveness of people. The Catholic Church on the contrary focuses upon what we all share in common which is our faith and our oneness in Christ. To be a Catholic one need not abandon one's individuality. In fact, the Catholic Church is most perfectly herself when all of her children display that rich diversity that God has fashioned into the very heart of humanity. We are most Catholic when we reflect our oneness of faith and worship that is achieved in response to

our rich mixture of human variety through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Each year during the Easter season, we listen to the story of the development of the Church from those first disciples of Jewish ancestry who reached out to the entire known world and invited all people to come together in Christ. The apostolic activity of these early Christians did not wait until people came to them – they went out to proclaim Christ Crucified and Risen from the dead and to invite every nation to belong to Him. This mesmerizing story reminds us that even in our beginning, the People of God continually welcomed others into their

fellowship. The Holy Spirit inspired those first Christians to see beyond the limits of their own ethnicity and religious backgrounds and comfort zones to bring Christ to the entire world. The vibrant stories from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles that so fill the Easter season provide a convincing narrative of how the first disciples grappled with the challenges of becoming a *Catholic Church* in the most fundamental sense of that title.

In passages such as we heard proclaimed in our first reading today, the infant church began encountering people in communities like Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia including those who

may not have been Jewish in their background. Those challenges of bringing people together established the rich legacy that we continue even today as peoples from throughout the world find their rightful place around the Lord's Altar. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles does not conceal the fact that bringing together people from diverse backgrounds was and remains a challenge and sometimes misunderstandings did and continue to occur. Yet it was always the presence and the grace of the Holy Spirit that led the Church to welcome those new members accommodating their uniqueness as they were incorporated into Christ Jesus.

This conference is but the latest chapter in a long history of reminding all of the members of the Church that we all belong to Christ and in Him we belong to one another through the grace of the Holy Spirit. We need not; indeed, we must not neglect our individuality and the uniqueness of our heritages. Yet these differences must never be barriers that separate us from Christ or one another. For in that same Book of the Acts of the Apostles, when the conversion account of the great Apostle Paul is recounted, Christ identifies Himself with the very community that Paul has been persecuting – Christ wears the face of His people then as well as today.

If the Catholic Church were to have a 12 episode series on our 2,000 year history and the challenges that we have faced and overcome together, it might likely be entitled: *The Catholic Church The Story of Him!* After all, Jesus is the foundation of our Oneness and He continues to beckon us all to go out into the whole world to bring others – with no attention paid to the diversity of those called to join this One family of Faith. We are who we are because *We are the Lord's.*