



Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church

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My dear friends in Christ,

I wish I could be present with all of you for this National Summit for Ministries with Youth and Young Adults, but previous commitments have not made it possible. However, I am so happy to have been invited to write to you as you gather to share your voice and vision for the world and the Church. If there is one message that I would like to share with you, it is one that I proclaim to young people all over the Diocese of Cleveland, where I serve as their Bishop: ***Never, never, never underestimate the power of the Spirit of God working in you, through you, and despite you . . . and most of the time, unbeknownst to you!*** It is the same powerful Spirit of God that gave birth to the Church and has guided, nurtured, and accompanied us through thick and thin, moments of holiness and sin, times of peace and turmoil, throughout of collective and personal histories.

Obviously, if you have taken time this summer to gather for this summit it is because you have experienced an encounter with Jesus Christ so powerful that, from that moment on, you have never been the same and your heart seeks to know all you can about Him, and hear and learn of even better ways of proclaiming His truth—a truth you have embraced and live passionately every day.

The truth of the Gospel lies at the very center of who we are and what we do in our ministry and profession. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, captures this truth in the very first sentence of his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, to Young People and the Entire People of God. He writes, “Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life. The very first words, then, that I would like to say to every young Christian are these: Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive!” (CV #1)

Like me, I know you have heard time and time again—and maybe we have said it ourselves—that our young people are the future, but as the Holy Father so rightly says in his Exhortation, “we cannot just say that young people are the future of our world. They are its present; even now, they are helping to enrich it. Young people are no longer children. They are at a time of life when they begin to assume a number of responsibilities, sharing alongside adults in the growth of the family, society and the Church.” (CV#64) So how do we

practically live that reality? How do we create opportunities to allow them to encounter us and places to encounter them, to listen and learn from them and listen to what burns deep within their hearts? While we would all like to say and believe that we run multiple programs and opportunities for this to happen, I would venture to say that it is not as vast as we would think. What I actually hear, from many of our youth, in particular our young adults, is that they often find it a challenge to simply find a time and place to meet within our churches and structures. If we could devise ways to help them find times and places to encounter us and each other, opportunities for them to know and feel that they are, as Pope Francis proclaims, not our future, but the “Now of God”, we could see even greater things happen. I know and believe that when we create these times and spaces for them the Spirit of God, who works in us, through us and despite us, will do the rest. The Bishops of the United States experienced a powerful moment of precisely this during the V Encuentro gathering last September, where a time and place of *encounter* was created for young adults and bishops to share a meal and share their thoughts. This and many other moments of encounter that we all have experienced, whether nationally or locally, in our parishes, schools, and universities, become fertile ground for the Spirit of God to continue to do His work.

And what then is the content, the message, the curriculum, of these times and places of encounter? Well, the Holy Father, in the fourth chapter of *Christus Vivit*, entitled, “A Message for all Young People”, spells it out. He writes, “Putting all else aside, I now wish to speak to young people about what is essential, the one thing we should never keep quiet about. It is a message containing three great truths that all of us need constantly to keep hearing. (CV#111) He proclaims the following three truths:

A God who is love

The very first truth I would tell each of you is this: “God loves you”. It makes no difference whether you have already heard it or not. I want to remind you of it. God loves you. Never doubt this, whatever may happen to you in life. At every moment, you are infinitely loved. (CV#112)

For him, you have worth; you are not insignificant. You are important to him, for you are the work of his hands. That is why he is concerned about you and looks to you with affection. “Trust the memory of God: his memory is not a ‘hard disk’ that ‘saves’ and ‘archives’ all our data. His memory is a heart filled with tender compassion, one that finds joy in ‘deleting’ from us every trace of evil”. [63] He does not keep track of your failings and he always helps you learn something even from your mistakes. Because he loves you. Try to keep still for a moment and let yourself feel his love. Try to silence all the noise within, and rest for a second in his loving embrace.

Christ saves you

The second great truth is that Christ, out of love, sacrificed himself completely in order to save you. His outstretched arms on the cross are the most telling sign that he is a friend who is willing to stop at nothing: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end”. (CV #118)

He is alive!

Finally, there is a third truth, inseparable from the second: Christ is alive! We need to keep reminding ourselves of this, because we can risk seeing Jesus Christ simply as a fine model from the distant past, as a memory, as someone who saved us two thousand years ago. But that would be of no use to us: it would leave us unchanged, it would not set us free. The one who fills us with his grace, the one who liberates us, transforms us, heals and consoles us is someone fully alive. He is the Christ, risen from the dead, filled with supernatural life and energy, and robed in boundless light. That is why Saint Paul could say: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile”. (CV #124)

The Holy Father concludes his exposition of these great powerful truths in a call to our young people in these words:

If in your heart you can learn to appreciate the beauty of this message, if you are willing to encounter the Lord, if you are willing to let him love you and save you, if you can make friends with him and start to talk to him, the living Christ, about the realities of your life, then you will have a profound experience capable of sustaining your entire Christian life. You will also be able to share that experience with other young people. For “being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”. (CV #129)

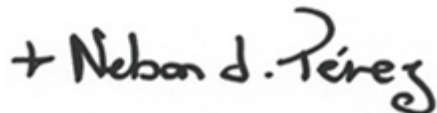
These powerful truths of the Gospel transcend the vast cultural diversity of our Church and our country. They are good for everyone, without distinction, at every place and time in history! However, the work of the missionary disciple requires of us, in imitation of the Master, a personal encounter with those we seek to evangelize and accompany in their journey of faith. We too must come to the side of the road and seek them out, walking with them even at their lowest points, in times of sorrow, anger and desperation, when all hope seems lost — much like Jesus encounters the disciples on the road to Emmaus—, and offering to each person the same Gospel of salvation.

Attention to the diversity of circumstances, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, religious and social upbringing of the young people we are called to work with, will help us recognize where they are in their journey of life and faith, so that we can be more effective in our work with them and the guidance we provide, but also more attentive, to discover and put to work the many gifts and talents God has given them for the benefit of the Church. This encounter, particularly the more we move towards the existential peripheries of church and society, will probably also lead us to realize that different circumstances may require different approaches, and even processes, for the mission. May the Holy Spirit effect within us the necessary pastoral conversion, and grant us the missionary zeal, patience and holy imagination needed for the work of evangelization with all youth and young adults in the United States today.

The task, then, and our challenge is how do we continue to create times and places of encounter to share about these truths in a way that is accessible to those we so passionately serve —our youth and young adults — in a way that goes beyond just knowledge, but in a manner that reaches their hearts, and never underestimating the power of the spirit of God working in us, through us, and despite us, and often times, unbeknownst to us!

Thank you for all you do and the generosity of spirit with which you serve. Be assured of my prayers for you, for your families, and those you so faithfully serve.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Nelson J. Pérez". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Nelson J. Pérez
Bishop of Cleveland
Chair, Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops