

*Presidential Address*

*Most Reverend José H. Gomez  
USCCB General Assembly  
November 16, 2020*

My dear brothers,

Before I begin, I would like us to pause to remember all our brothers and sisters who are victim-survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

In light of the Holy See's report on Theodore McCarrick, we again want to express our deep sorrow and pray that they might find healing and hope. Let us also renew our commitment today to protecting children and vulnerable adults and to eliminating this scourge of abuse from the Church.

As we know, this has been a long and challenging year for all of us in the Church. And because of that, I wanted to share more personally my reflections today.

And I know it has been a challenging year for all of you and your people. It's been a challenging year for everyone here at the USCCB, too.

Recently we celebrated a beautiful moment in the history of the American Church — the beatification of Father Michael McGivney, founder of the Knights of Columbus.

As you know, Father McGivney was a newly ordained priest in the years just after the Civil War. Blacks had been freed from slavery, but they were far from free.

It was a time marked by racist violence, anti-immigrant intolerance, widespread poverty, and growing social problems. Catholics faced discrimination and suspicion from politicians, the media, and cultural leaders.

Father McGivney met these injustices by living the Gospel. Love was not an abstraction or a "cause" for him. The widow and the orphan, the father with no job; the prisoner on death row. Blessed Michael McGivney knew their faces and knew their names.

Few of his words survive. Just 13 letters and some newspaper quotes.<sup>1</sup> But by his works, he testified to the tender love of God for every person. To the truth that we belong to one another, that we are all brothers and sisters.

And brothers, I believe we can look to Blessed Michael McGivney as a model and intercessor for our own ministries.

He was a pastor in a time of moral confusion and social unrest. Just as we are. Like us, he was a priest called to minister in a pandemic. In fact, he gave his life during the flu pandemic of 1890, one of more than 1 million who died worldwide.

Even after many months, we are still living in the shadow of this coronavirus pandemic. In every diocese, we see people's lives have been devastated. They've lost loved ones, they have been cut off from their families. They've seen their livelihoods and futures disappear in uncertainty.

And now we are witnessing the deep human costs of the lockdowns and mandated isolation. We see so many signs of despair throughout our society. People are losing hope.

As pastors, we grieve with our people. This plague has scattered our plans and priorities, too.

I think each of us understands what St. Paul meant when he said: *"There is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches."*<sup>ii</sup>

Throughout these months, I find myself returning to that extraordinary moment of prayer that Pope Francis conducted at St. Peter's Basilica last March.

We all remember the scene. The colonnade was empty and dark; the ancient cobblestones were wet with rain. The Pope was alone before Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

It was a powerful witness to his ministry as St. Peter's successor and Christ's Vicar on earth.

But I also felt that Pope Francis was speaking to us, as bishops. By his words and actions, he was confirming his brethren, strengthening us in our vocation as successors of the apostles.<sup>iii</sup>

Pope Francis often reminds us that as bishops, we are not only administrators. We are "shepherds in the footsteps of the Shepherd." And I know we are all grateful for his fraternal encouragement.

In union with the Holy Father, we understand that we are apostles, chosen by Jesus Christ, entrusted with his divine mission.

We understand that we are here to testify and sanctify.

To invite people to share in the holiness of the living God.<sup>iv</sup>

We have taken Pope Francis' example to heart in our dioceses and in our work in the U.S. bishops' conference.

Together we have recovered the truth that evangelization is the Church's deepest identity and essential mission.<sup>v</sup> We experienced that strongly with our "Joy of the Gospel" convocation in 2017 and also during the pastoral journey of the Fifth Encuentro in 2019.

We are also striving to reform our society in light of Gospel values and the Church's social doctrine. Here again, we are inspired by the Pope's teaching, most recently his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, on the unity of the human family.

Of course, it is essential that we continue to proclaim the sanctity and dignity of human life from conception to natural death.

It is also essential that we empower our Catholic people to engage as faithful citizens in meeting the challenges in our society — abortion and euthanasia; racism and immigration; poverty and criminal justice reform; gender and the family; the environment and religious freedom.

But brothers, I also want to suggest that in this moment, we need to respond to the urgent evangelical challenges posed by this pandemic.

In this hour in our country, our neighbors need the Church more than ever. Now is the hour for Christian witness.

As we know, people's faith in God has been shaken. At the heart of their fears are fundamental questions about divine Providence and the goodness of God.

This is far more than a public health emergency. Everywhere, we see spreading the fear of illness and death.

As pastors, we understand what this means. It means that the core message of the Gospel — Christ's love for every person, the power of his cross, the promise of his resurrection — is fading from our neighbors' hearts.

Brothers, in this time of death, we hold the Word of life. We come in the name of the God whose love is stronger than death.<sup>vi</sup>

Following the courageous example of Blessed Michael McGivney, the Church needs to weep now with those who are weeping.<sup>vii</sup> We need to tell our neighbors the good news that we have a Redeemer. Who died, so that we might live. Who passed through the valley of the shadow of death. So that we should fear no evil, not even death.<sup>viii</sup>

In this moment, it is also important that the Church proclaim once again the truth that human history is salvation history. That God has a beautiful plan for every human heart. For every nation. And for all creation. We need to give people hope. That in all things, even suffering and death, God is working for the good of those who love him.<sup>ix</sup>

Finally, in this moment, I think it is urgent for the Church to bear witness to the transcendent destiny of the human person. As a child of God, redeemed in the blood of his only Son. Called to live as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Brothers, we all understand that these times of social unrest and pandemic call for a heroic Christianity. We need to continue to form and empower missionary disciples, as Pope Francis calls us to do.

And I am very encouraged by our new strategic plan, which is titled, “Created Anew by the Body and Blood of Christ: Source of our Healing and Hope.”

This is our mission in this moment. To continue to bring healing and hope to the people of our time.

As we go forward, let us ask for the prayers of Blessed Michael McGivney. May he help us to bring people to a new encounter with Jesus Christ. Who loves us and offers his Body and Blood for us.<sup>x</sup>

And let us entrust our apostolic ministry to Mary’s Immaculate Heart. May she help us to hold fast to our duty, to stay close to St. Peter, and to lead all people to the heart of her Son.

Thank you, brothers. Let’s keep praying for one another in these challenging times!

---

<sup>i</sup> Andrew Walther and Maureen Walther, *The Knights of Columbus: An Illustrated History* (Square One, 2020); Kevin Coyne, “The McGivney Letters,” *Columbia* (August 2018). [www.kofc.org/en/columbia/detail/the-mcgivney-letters.html](http://www.kofc.org/en/columbia/detail/the-mcgivney-letters.html).

<sup>ii</sup> 2 Cor. 11:28.

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 22:32.

<sup>iv</sup> Pope Francis, Meeting with the Bishop Guests of the World Meeting of Families (San Carlos Borromeo Seminary, Philadelphia, September 27, 2015); Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 20, 24–25; Heb. 12:10.

<sup>v</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

<sup>vi</sup> Phil. 2:1; Song 8:6.

<sup>vii</sup> Rom. 12:15; Rev. 7:17; 21:4.

<sup>viii</sup> Rev. 1:18; 2:8; Ps. 23.

<sup>ix</sup> Rom. 8:28.

<sup>x</sup> 2 Cor. 4:15; Gal. 2:20.