Remarks at the Plenary Assembly

Most Reverend José H. Gomez,
Archbishop of Los Angeles
President, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

(Pre-Recorded for Delivery)
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Washington, DC
June 16, 2021

Greetings, my brothers! I pray that you and your people are well. I know we all hope this will be the last time we are forced to gather “virtually.”

I wanted to say a few words today and offer my perspective on some of the challenges and opportunities we face in the coming months.

To begin, I’d like to observe something obvious: We have been living through some extraordinary times.

We’ve seen a pandemic shut down our civilization, including the Church, for more than a year. We’ve lived through riots in our major cities, rising social divisions and unrest, and maybe the most polarized election our country has ever seen.

Even with the lockdowns ending, our neighbors are still struggling. They’ve lost loved ones and livelihoods. Many have lost confidence in God and hope for the future. After being isolated for months, some have grown distrustful of our leaders and institutions.

I know that we all know this. But I think it’s important to be reminded. As we all realize, the Church’s mission will be shaped for years to come by the troubles of these recent months.

I was noticing, even before the pandemic, how often Pope Francis talks about the importance of unity — not only among peoples, but also unity within the Church.

In Fratelli Tutti, the Holy Father sets out his program for rebuilding the world after this pandemic. He gives us a beautiful vision of the “unity and common destiny” of the human family in God’s “providential plan.”

This vision has been inspiring to me in thinking about my own ministry. It seems to me that in these times when society is so divided, the Church has a great duty to more fully reflect the unity that God wants for his creation and his people.

It’s not realistic to expect the Church to stay immune from the pressures of division. Those pressures are all around us. The Church is divine, she is the Body of Christ. But we are all human in the Church, after all. And we are living in a secular society where politics is becoming the
substitute religion for a lot of people. So, we need to guard against the temptation to think about the Church in simply political terms.

In his homily for Pentecost, the Holy Father said: “Today, if we listen to the Spirit, we will not be concerned with conservatives and progressives, traditionalists and innovators, right and left. … The Paraclete impels us to unity … the harmony of diversity. He makes us see ourselves as parts of the same body, brothers and sisters of one another.”

The Church’s unity is made real and visible in the Eucharist. That beautiful image from the Church’s first days remains our ideal: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Unity in the Church does not mean conformity of opinion or that bishops will never disagree. The apostles argued passionately. They disagreed over pastoral strategies and methods. But never about the truth of the Gospel.

In the wake of this pandemic, our Holy Father is calling us to strengthen the unity of the Body of Christ. What he said recently to the bishops of Brazil is also important for us.

“It is possible to overcome the pandemic,” he said. “It is possible to overcome its consequences. But we can only do so if we are united. The bishops’ conference must be as one at this time, because the suffering people are one.”

Only a Church that is united can heal the brokenness and challenge the injustices that we see more clearly now in the wake of this pandemic.

The Gospel we proclaim is the truth of salvation. It is also the most powerful force in history for promoting human dignity and human flourishing.

The power of our Catholic vision flows from our profound awareness of the unity of life, from conception to natural death, and the unity of the human family, every person a child of God.

What God wants for the human family is meant to be reflected in the unity of the Church, which is the family of God.

One of the saints said: “All with Peter to Jesus through Mary! By seeing ourselves as part of the Church and united to our brothers and sisters in the faith, we understand more deeply that we are brothers and sisters of all mankind, for the Church has been sent to all the peoples of the earth.”

As we know, brothers, there are forces at work right now in our culture that threaten not only the unity of the human family, but also the very truth about God’s creation and human nature.

Our Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has said: “This is the age of sin against God the Creator.”
Pope Francis has stressed the truth of these words and said: “The problem is worldwide! The exploitation of creation, and the exploitation of persons. We are experiencing a moment of the annihilation of man as the image of God.”

My brothers, we stand at a historic crossroads, as our Holy Father is telling us. It falls to the Church in this moment to defend the truth about God the Creator, and the truth about the sanctity of the human person and the unity of the human family in God’s plan for creation.

This is our mission, the urgent task of the whole Church in this moment — after this pandemic, in the face of the chaos and confusion in our society.

And I’m thinking that it has to start with me and with all of us. So, my prayer is that we all remain united in what is essential — our love for Jesus and our desire to proclaim him as the living God and the true path for humanity.

One last thought, brothers: As you know, I have a deep devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. When I was growing up my family went on pilgrimage to the shrine in Mexico City nearly every summer.

And I find myself turning to her a lot during these days. I was reflecting today how the Popes see her apparition as a sign of unity for the continent. St. John Paul II called her shrine “the Marian heart of America.”

Later this year we celebrate the 490th anniversary of the Virgin’s apparition. So let us look to her in this moment and entrust all our challenges to her maternal heart.

May she help us to keep our hearts humble and united in the service of Jesus, as we seek to continue the evangelization of our country and our continent in this moment.

Thank you, brothers, for listening, and may God bless you and your ministry.

---

ii *Homily, Solemnity of Pentecost* (May 23, 2021)
iii Acts 2:42.
iv *Video Message for the 58th Annual Assembly of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil* (April 15, 2021).
v St. Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, 139.
vi *Dialogue with Polish Bishops* (July 27, 2016)
vii *Homily*, Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Mexico City, January 23, 1999).