REMARKS BY HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP GABRIELE CACCIA
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS PLENARY ASSEMBLY
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Thank you, Archbishop Coakley, and my thanks to Msgr. Fuller, the General Secretariat, and all who support this Conference. I am grateful for your welcome and for the generous collaboration I have experienced since my arrival in Washington.

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Dear Brother Bishops:

It is a joy to be with you again. As the representative of Pope Leo XIV to the United States, I assure you of the Holy Father's closeness and fraternal support as you gather for this Plenary Assembly.

Since we met in June, I have had the privilege of joining many of you for episcopal ordinations and installations, significant anniversaries, and ecclesial meetings. I renew my congratulations and encouragement to those beginning new assignments. I have also joined you in prayer for those who have died during these months, commending them to the Lord's mercy. My travels have already taken me to twenty-seven dioceses in eighteen different states, deepening my appreciation for the beauty and diversity of the Church in this country.

Your dioceses differ greatly in their histories, cultural settings, resources, and pastoral needs. Yet everywhere I have found people who love

the Church and are committed to her mission. I am grateful for your pastoral zeal and ingenuity, and for the priests, religious, and lay faithful who work with you in a spirit of co-responsibility.

Among the most memorable moments of these months were the beatifications of Archbishop Fulton Sheen in St. Louis and the five Georgia Martyrs in Savannah. In St. Louis, Cardinal Tagle reminded us that the blessedness of the evangelizer comes from being known, called, and sent by Christ. He pointed to the Lord whom Sheen encountered in the Word and in the Holy Eucharist, and whom he learned to recognize in the poor and the suffering.

In Savannah, Cardinal Frank Leo presented the Franciscan martyrs as models for the Church today through their evangelizing zeal and their courageous witness to the sanctity of marriage and the dignity of every human person. Their example reminds us that "no greater treasure can be found in this earthly existence than following Jesus with an undivided heart."

Together, these six new Blesseds remind us that the Church's mission bears fruit through lives dedicated completely to Christ. May their witness renew our own commitment to Him.

Tomorrow's commemoration of the Dedication of the Basilicas of Saints Peter and Paul turns our thoughts toward Rome, where the first regional groups of bishops will soon make their pilgrimage *ad limina Apostolorum*, to the thresholds of the Apostles.

In June, I spoke about communion and mission. The *ad limina* visit gives concrete expression to both. Its three principal moments—the pilgrimage to the Apostles' tombs, the meeting with the Holy Father, and the discussions with the Roman Curia—strengthen our hierarchical communion and renew our dedication to the apostolic mission.

You bring to Rome the life of your particular Churches, in each of which the one Church of Christ is present and active. Through this encounter, their gifts enrich the whole Church, and you receive encouragement for the ministry to which you will return.

The **first moment** gives the visit its name: the pilgrimage to the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul.

You will go to Rome as successors of the Apostles to renew your profession of the faith they proclaimed and sealed with their blood. Their tombs recall the apostolic foundations of the Church – the same Church that Christ continues to teach, sanctify, and govern through our episcopal ministry. In celebrating the Eucharist there, you will express and deepen the communion we share in Him. Peter and Paul knew their weakness, yet trusted the Lord who called them. May their witness strengthen you to carry forward the apostolic mission with courage and generosity, sustained by that same Lord and united with the Successor of Peter and with one another.

Following the guidance of the Directory for the *ad limina* visit, I encourage you to invite priests, seminarians, religious, and lay faithful from

your dioceses who are living in Rome to share in these liturgies at the tombs of the Apostles. Gathered around you, their shepherds, they will offer a more vivid expression of ecclesial communion.

The **second moment** is the meeting with the Successor of Peter.

This encounter will have a special significance: you will hear the first Pope speaking with an American accent! You will come before a native son of this land, seated on the Chair of St. Peter! The Church in the United States, and the Church in Peru, have given the universal Church a great gift in Pope Leo. A son of Chicago, and a shepherd of Chiclayo, but he now belongs to the whole world.

You will bring him the joys, difficulties, and gifts of your particular Churches, and receive his encouragement and guidance. Your experience will also assist him in his service to the whole Church. This encounter strengthens the hierarchical communion – *cum Petro et sub Petro* – in which we exercise our episcopal ministry. This communion serves the unity of the Church in the apostolic faith and strengthens our common witness to the Gospel.

Here communion and mission meet: strengthened in the one faith, you will return to your people with renewed courage to proclaim Christ and invite others into communion with Him and His Church.

The Holy Father continues to nourish this communion through his Wednesday catecheses on the four Constitutions of the Second Vatican

Council. He invites the whole Church to give renewed attention to the riches of these documents, through which the Holy Spirit guides the Church in our own time and deepens our communion. Reflecting with Pope Leo on these texts offers us a beautiful opportunity to grow together in faith and communion and to draw fresh inspiration for our shared mission. This reflection can also be a spiritual preparation for your personal encounter with him in Rome.

I have also been struck by the example of the multitudes of faithful who have gathered during the Holy Father's most recent apostolic visits, often waiting hours just for an opportunity to see him and receive his blessing. Their devotion reminds us what a gift it is to meet the Successor of Peter. May their example encourage us to approach this audience with the same prayerful expectation and with gratitude for this opportunity, ready to receive the grace the Lord wishes to offer us through His Vicar on earth.

The **third moment** consists of meetings with the Dicasteries and other institutions of the Roman Curia.

Pope Francis's Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* calls for open and cordial dialogue, in which the Curia offers counsel, encouragement, and guidance, while receiving the bishops' suggestions for making its service more effective. These meetings provide an opportunity to address concrete pastoral questions in a spirit of communion, serving the good of the whole Church and safeguarding her common discipline. In this way, the Curia

assists the Holy Father in his universal ministry and supports you in the care of the Churches entrusted to you.

Bring your questions with candor and share your pastoral experience generously: what is bearing fruit, where you face difficulties, and what assistance you need. Your quinquennial reports, which many of you have already submitted, will help the institutions prepare for a fruitful exchange.

Traveling in regional groups will also give you time to listen to one another as brothers. A difficulty faced in one diocese may be shared by another; a pastoral initiative developed in one place may offer help to others. Speaking to the bishops of Peru in Lima just a few days ago, Pope Leo reminded them that "walking together fosters communion, a gift for which we must always pray: communion with the Successor of Peter, with the other bishops, with men and women religious and with the whole People of God. This is essential for faithfully traveling the Way which is Christ." May the conversations begun in Rome continue after you return, strengthening this communion in the daily exercise of your ministry.

As you prepare for this pilgrimage, I would like to return to Blessed Fulton Sheen.

In his autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, he recalls waiting for an audience with Pope St. Paul VI. During those few minutes, he reviewed his life and ministry, asking himself: "Have I really served the Church as well as I should?" He considered the gifts and opportunities he had received and

pondered whether he had used them generously. He ultimately concluded that he "had done little."

Yet when he entered the Pope's presence, something changed. He said to the Holy Father, "Now that I come before your Holiness, I see the Church *personalized*." In his filial affection for the Successor of Peter, he recognized how deeply he loved the Church and Christ, her invisible Head.

Sheen's account suggests two dispositions for your visit: the humility to examine our ministry honestly, and the openness to renew the love for Christ and His Church that sustains our mission.

Preparing your quinquennial reports has required you to review the life of your dioceses. Let this preparation also become a prayerful examination of your own episcopal ministry. Have we allowed the Good Shepherd to shape our hearts after His own? Have we protected time for prayer amid the demands of administration?

At the Jubilee of Bishops last year, Pope Leo urged: "May every priest, without exception, sense the fatherhood, brotherhood and friendship of his Bishop." Do our priests experience this closeness, especially those who are ill, isolated, or discouraged?

In *Dilexi Te*, Pope Leo called for a Church that "makes room for the little ones and walks poor with the poor." Does our way of life, together with our pastoral priorities, reflect this closeness to the poor? Do they find a

welcome in our communities? Have we helped all the faithful recognize and offer their gifts for the Church's mission?

Let us bring these questions before the Lord who called us and continues to sustain us. His mercy gives us the courage to acknowledge where we need to grow, and begin again.

An honest review also recognizes what grace has accomplished. Among the encouraging signs in the quinquennial reports is the growing number of adult catechumens. In your dioceses, I have also witnessed gifts that no report can fully convey: the daily fidelity of priests and religious, the generosity of families, the care offered to migrants and the elderly, and so many other good initiatives. Bring these signs of hope with you to Rome, giving thanks for what the Lord is doing among your people.

It is my hope that, like Blessed Fulton Sheen, you will discover in your encounter with the Successor of Peter a renewed love for the Church and confidence in the Lord who sustains her. Amid the full schedule, allow yourselves time for prayer and for strengthening friendships with your brother bishops. The time you devote to these relationships will bear fruit in the life of the Churches you serve.

Before concluding, allow me to offer one final thought. In *Pastores Gregis*, Pope Saint John Paul II compared the communion between the universal Church and the particular Churches to the circulation of blood: from the heart to the body's extremities and back again. His accompanying

image of the vine and its branches reminds us that Christ Himself gives life to the whole Church.

This image helps us to see how communion sustains mission. You come to Rome, to the heart of our visible unity, bringing the faith of your people, their gifts, hopes, and wounds. Through prayer and encounter with the Successor of Peter and your brother bishops, the bonds of communion are strengthened. Then, as blood flows from the heart to nourish the body, you return to your Churches with renewed strength to proclaim Christ and draw others into His life. The movement toward the heart becomes a fresh impulse for mission.

When we met in June, the consecration of this nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus gave a spiritual center to our gathering. That same love gathers us into communion and sends us forth in mission. The heart of Christ is the heart of the Good Shepherd, who gathers His flock and goes in search of those who have strayed.

Pope Leo's recent apostolic journeys to Spain, France, and South America offer us an example of this pastoral movement: a shepherd going out to meet his people, not waiting for them to come to him! May his missionary example inspire us to seek those who have become distant from the Church, those who feel forgotten, and those who have yet to hear the Gospel.

Dear Brothers, may your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles renew your faith. May your meeting with the Successor of Peter strengthen your hope. And may the communion you experience deepen your pastoral charity, so that you return with hearts renewed in the love of the Good Shepherd, who seeks the lost and lays down His life for His sheep.

Please know that I accompany you in this preparation and during your pilgrimage with my prayers and fraternal affection. I thank you once more for your wholehearted welcome. Please rest assured that you always have in me a brother ready to walk with you. May Mary, the Immaculate Conception and Queen of the Apostles, intercede for us.