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UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS PLENARY ASSEMBLY**

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Dear Brothers,

Greetings once again! It is good to be with you, and to spend these days in your company. As always, please know of the closeness and prayers of the Holy Father. Thank you again, Archbishop Broglio; and thank you, Fr. Fuller and the staff of the General Secretariat, for all that you do to prepare for this gathering, and for the invitation to be with you.

Much has happened in the life of the Church since we last convened! In July we had the Eucharistic Congress, which made quite an impression on Catholics in this country. In September, you “baby bishops” went to Rome for your training course. It was good to see you there! (I hope you were good students!) A couple of weeks ago, the Second Session of the General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was concluded. We will continue to experience what it means to be a synodal Church in our mission of evangelization. Also, we have been living through an intense election cycle, which has challenged us to give witness to the Gospel of peace in the midst of a political climate that seems like a kind of war. At the same time, we are preparing to welcome a great gift to the Church and to the world: a Jubilee which announces to everyone a hope that does not disappoint.

I will touch on several of these events, but I will do so in the context of something that ties them all together: the Pope’s new encyclical *Dilexit nos*, on the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

A Return to the Heart

At the very time when the universal Synod was coming to its completion, and with a Jubilee Year about to begin, the Pope has somewhat “surprised” us by returning to a very basic element in the Church’s piety, something that might even seem too “simple”: devotion to the heart of Jesus. Isn’t it interesting that, of all

things, the Pope would give us, precisely at this moment, an encyclical on the Sacred Heart? I think this is something worth paying attention to! What meaning are we to derive from this call to return to the heart? In fact, I think we can apply this message about devotion to the heart of Christ to much of what we are experiencing in the Church today as disciples and as bishops, in particular: Eucharistic Revival, synodality, and the coming Jubilee.

The Sacred Heart and Eucharistic Revival

To begin with, the Holy Father, in his encyclical, connects devotion to the Sacred Heart with Eucharistic encounter. To do so, he recalls the witness of an English Cardinal who is very popular in this country. In the opening chapter of the encyclical, Pope Francis writes the following:

“Saint John Henry Newman took as his motto the phrase *Cor ad cor loquitur*, since, beyond all our thoughts and ideas, the Lord saves us by speaking to our hearts from his Sacred Heart. This realization led him, the distinguished intellectual, to recognize that his deepest encounter with himself and with the Lord came not from his reading or reflection, but from his prayerful dialogue, heart to heart, with Christ, alive and present. It was in the Eucharist that Newman encountered the living heart of Jesus, capable of setting us free, giving meaning to each moment of our lives, and bestowing true peace.”¹

What Newman discovers is what each of us has discovered in his own encounter, both with the Eucharist, and with that “beating heart” of the Lord whom we sense when we receive the gift of prayer. This experience imparts a knowledge that is deeper than any doctrinal formula: Christ is alive in our midst, and he desires to be one with us. This is what has the power to change our lives, first at an individual level, and then as members of the Body, the Church.

A few months ago, we shared together the Eucharistic Congress, a high point of our Eucharistic Revival. You bishops discerned, guided by the Spirit, that our

¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Dilexit Nos* On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ, 24 October 2024, 26.

people needed to have a deeper encounter with Christ in the Eucharist: the kind of personal encounter for which Pope Francis has advocated from the start of his pontificate, as he expressed in *Evangelii Gaudium*. And indeed, this is what has occurred for many throughout the Eucharistic Revival. They have had a religious experience of the saving love of Jesus. Such an experience is not an end, but a beginning. When we encounter Christ's love in this way, we are compelled to share it with others. And this is what we are the shepherds of at this time in our country. We must help the Church find the answers to the questions that were being asked at the conclusion of the Eucharistic Congress: How do we move from personal encounter to mission? Where are the new directions that the Spirit is leading us in our evangelization? What new avenues do we need to open in the life of the Church? After all, a broad Eucharistic Revival can only occur if we are able to live the Eucharist in all its dimensions: not only by gathering to adore, but also by going out on mission, so that Christ can encounter others.

Along these lines, the encyclical on the Sacred Heart reminds us that there are two essential aspects that contemporary devotion needs to combine: *first*, personal spiritual experience; and *second*, communal missionary commitment.² Neither of these aspects can stand alone. If we have only a personal spiritual experience but do not engage in a communal mission alongside other disciples who are different from us – remaining instead “in our own world” – then our personal encounter with the Lord will do little to evangelize others. On the other hand, if we engage in the communal mission but neglect the story of our own personal encounter with Christ, we will lose what makes our witness uniquely powerful. Each of us needs to keep alive the story of our own “Galilee”: the concrete ways in which Christ attracted us to follow him. When people hear these stories, they come to believe that God can touch their lives too! Just look at Saint Paul: his own personal encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus was always at the heart of the Gospel he preached.

² Cf. *Dilexit Nos*, 91.

Synodal Mission from the Heart of Christ

Several years into our synodal journey as a Church, some are still asking, “What is synodality?” Perhaps the language of devotion to the Sacred Heart can give us a way to understand. The synodal Church is a gathering of people who have come into relationship with the heart of Christ, and who are journeying together in order to share that relationship with others. This Synod on Synodality was never about completing a “to-do” list. As Pope Francis has always said, synodality is not about predicting certain outcomes. Instead, it’s about inviting more participation in the Church’s missionary discernment; while at the same time, deepening our shared participation with the Lord. For that reason, we shouldn’t judge the “success” of the Synod based on which decisions have been made or whose vision for the Church has prevailed. If we are looking to see what the Synod has “accomplished”, we should look instead at the way in which conversations are happening at various levels in the Church. Is everyone participating who should be? Does listening take priority over competing? Is it an exercise of shared discernment?

To dialogue in this way requires constantly “returning to the heart”. This takes a lot of discipline! It doesn’t yield immediate “results”, and it doesn’t win quick and decisive “victories”. But it does something much more powerful in terms of establishing communion. First, when we return to our own heart, we find what is actually there: our true desires, our hopes and dreams, our thoughts and our judgments. We also encounter our fears, our disappointments, our disdain and our enmity. By opening our hearts – and all that is in them – to the heart of Christ, we allow him to unite his heart with ours, which both affirms and purifies our hearts as they become one with his. With a heart that is more united to the heart of Christ, we have more capacity for unity with the hearts of others.

And so, for those who feel disappointed about the Church’s synodal process to this point – either for what it has been or for what it *hasn’t* been – I would share the encouragement that I think Pope Francis is offering us through this encyclical. Essentially the Pope is saying to us: Look deeper for what synodality is about. Look to the heart: your own heart, the heart of Christ, and the heart of the other person. From there, we can embark on a shared mission as Church. But always open to the

Spirit, who transcends our differences and brings harmony, sometimes in surprising ways. This, we might say, is “synodality of the heart”.

The Grace of the Jubilee

Allow me, lastly, to refer to a huge grace that we are being given for this moment in history: the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025. A jubilee is exactly what our world and our country need right now, but which no secular power or political solution could ever achieve. We can all see the fragmentation in the human community, especially during these seasons of heightened political activity. And if we look within, we can see the fragmentation in ourselves. But in his encyclical, the Holy Father explains how the human heart is capable of “uniting the fragments”. He says:

“[T]he heart makes all authentic bonding possible, since a relationship not shaped by the heart is incapable of overcoming the fragmentation caused by individualism. Two monads may approach one another, but they will never truly connect. A society dominated by narcissism and self-centeredness will increasingly become ‘heartless’. This will lead in turn to the ‘loss of desire’, since as other persons disappear from the horizon we find ourselves trapped within walls of our own making, no longer capable of healthy relationships. As a result, we also become incapable of openness to God. As Heidegger puts it, to be open to the divine we need to build a ‘guest house’.”³

By returning to the heart, we can address the ways in which we ourselves have become, if not incapable, then at least “handicapped”, in our way of relating to certain others due to fragmentation. Imagine if, to use Heidegger’s term, I could allow my heart to be a “guest house” for a brother with whom I have some difficulty. This would be a work of synodality. It would also be a work of jubilee: a work that will help us, as bishops, to give a more credible witness to our people of the hope that does not disappoint. This is the work to which we are called in this coming Jubilee Year.

³ *Dilexit Nos*, 17.

Conclusion

Eucharistic Revival ... a more synodal form of evangelization ... A Jubilee Year of Hope ... All of these experiences will produce fruit, provided that we return to the heart of Christ, that sacred place where human longing and divine love are united. It is there, in the heart of Christ, where we re-discover in a personal way the *kerygma* that we preach: Christ has become one of us, he has suffered and died to heal our wounds, he has risen, and he is alive with us now in the Spirit. The deeper we go into his heart, the more strengthened we will be to proclaim the good news together: the news of a hope that, in spite of everything in this world, does not disappoint.