

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
TO THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
PLENARY ASSEMBLY, NOVEMBER 15, 2022**

My Dear Brothers in Christ,

I greet you in the name of Pope Francis, assuring you of his closeness, fraternal support and prayers as you gather for this Plenary Assembly of the Episcopal Conference. I thank His Excellency José Gómez, Archbishop of Los Angeles and President of the USCCB and Father Fuller and the staff of the General Secretariat for the invitation to speak to you, as the Church in the United States continues to journey together. In a special way, I wish to acknowledge and thank Archbishop Gomez and Archbishop Allen Vigneron who are completing their terms as President and Vice President of the Conference.

Archbishop Vigneron occasionally reminds me of an address I gave to you in which I asked, “So, where are we?” It is a question I frequently pose to the staff at the Apostolic Nunciature. I think it is necessary to answer the question so that, as we walk together on the Synodal path, we can also ask: “Where are we going?” This, I believe, is an important question, not only as you elect new leadership for your Conference, but also as you set out your strategic plan and pastoral priorities.

A Missionary Church

As Bishops, we walk together *cum Petro et sub Petro*. As we approach the 10th anniversary of the election of Pope Francis, it may be useful to reflect on some of the persistent themes of his Pontificate, which can offer us precious indications for our own way forward. In a short address to the General Congregation of Cardinals, before the 2013 conclave, then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio said:

“When the Church does not go out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential and then she gets sick. [...] When the Church is self-referential, without realizing it, she believes she has her own light. She ceases to be the *mysterium lunae* and this gives rise to the grave evil of spiritual worldliness. [...] Simplifying, there are two images of the Church: either the evangelizing Church that comes out of herself, [...] or the worldly Church that lives in herself, of herself, for herself.”

This captures the approach that Pope Francis has been trying to encourage over these 10 years.

Beginning with his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis encouraged us to be a missionary Church that goes forth to announce the joyful message, more deeply committed to her mission than to maintenance of structures that may no longer adequately serve the mission. He writes:

I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 27).

Pope Francis proposes the image of “a poor Church for the poor”, a Church close to the abandoned and forgotten, a Church which conveys the tenderness of God. He proposes an evangelical Church, called to measure itself constantly against the breadth and richness of the Gospel, a Church willing to go forth from its comfort zone (cf. *EG*, 20). In an early interview, also in 2013, he said: “Evangelizing, in fact, is the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists to evangelize.” (ANTONIO SPADARO, “INTERVIEW WITH PAPA FRANCESCO,” IN *LA CIVILTÀ CATTOLICA* 2013 III 449-477.)

Thus, the synodal process, as well as the Pope’s encyclicals and exhortations should be understood in a missionary key. A question for us, my brother Bishops: does the Church in the United States understand herself in this way, especially as we live through a time of accelerated change?

A helpful way of answering this question may be to examine how well our local churches embody the characteristics of an evangelizing community, described in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24: Do we go forth and take the initiative? Do we get involved? Do we accompany others, showing patience? What are the fruits that we are seeing from our evangelizing efforts? Finally, do our local churches demonstrate the joy, which flows from the Eucharist?

The Eucharistic Revival, currently underway, affords an opportunity for the Church in the United States to experience and celebrate the nuptial joy of a community that is loved by the Lord, of a community that evangelizes and that is

herself evangelized. Let the Eucharistic Revival be lived in this light – as an evangelizing moment!

Pope Francis points out that there are barriers to this experience of joy and to the Church's evangelizing efforts. One such barrier is our own internal structures which are always in need of pastoral and missionary conversion for evangelization, rather than for the Church's self-preservation. (cf. *EG*, 25, 27).

A second barrier is sin; hence, the Holy Father speaks of the Church, using the image of the "field hospital":

"I clearly see that what the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and reignite the hearts of the faithful, closeness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after a battle ... One must treat [the injured person's] wounds. Then we can talk about everything else."

The image of the "field hospital" highlights a related element of this Pontificate: mercy. At the end of the Jubilee of Mercy, the Pope reminded us that mercy is not a parenthesis in the life of the Church. While this mercy come to us abundantly in the Sacrament of Penance, it is also made manifest through our practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

Catholic Social Doctrine, in particular, the Church's outreach to the poor, the marginalized, and the migrant help show forth her merciful and maternal face. The Church in the United States has been prophetic in its openness toward those suffering from a humanitarian crisis at the border, and for decades, it has been passionate in its defense of the unborn. Now, following the *Dobbs* decision, your "Walking with Moms in Need" initiative takes on new importance in showing forth the maternal tenderness of the Church for all her children, demonstrating that the priority is Mercy rather than cold judgment.

Co-Responsibility for the Church

Pope Francis, then, is calling us to be a missionary Church that encourages everyone to be an evangelist. This requires animating the vocation of the lay faithful to accept responsibility for the Church. In a 2009 address, Pope Benedict XVI already called for "a change in mindset, particularly concerning lay people." He added: "They must no longer be viewed as 'collaborators' of the clergy, but truly be recognized as "co-responsible" for the Church's being and action, thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity" (DISCOURSE FOR THE OPENING OF A PASTORAL CONFERENCE OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME, MAY 26, 2009).

Key words here are *mature* and *committed*. It is notable that three of Pope Francis' major documents – *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato si*, and *Amoris Laetitia* – conclude with a chapter dedicated to the spiritual life. The entire exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* is a beautiful meditation on the call to holiness of all the faithful. Even his latest letter on the liturgy, *Desiderio desideravi*, calls for a greater liturgical formation, not only of the clergy, but of the laity. The strong emphasis throughout this Pontificate on discernment relates not only to our discernment as Pastors but also to the discernment of individuals and communities.

Such an approach cannot bear fruit if we neglect or have neglected the proper spiritual and liturgical formation of the laity. However, if we accompany our people more closely, then we can more easily *trust* them and encourage their spiritual growth. Just as seminary formators accompany seminarians, helping them reach affective maturity, so too is it our task to accompany the lay faithful in order that they may accept co-responsibility for the Church and the world.

The task of accompanying others is one of the great pastoral challenges of our time. In *Gaudete et Exsultate* (cf. nn. 6-7), Pope Francis reminds us of the “holiness next door,” stating: “We must not think only of the blessed and canonized, because the ‘Spirit spreads holiness everywhere.’”

How are we promoting that ordinary holiness in our local churches? Are there sufficient spiritual resources for the priests *and* laity within our Dioceses? What contributions might the lay ecclesial movements make to the growth in holiness of “rank-and-file” parishioners?

The Holy Father challenges us not only to accompany others in their spiritual journey but also in their *human* journey. We are well aware of the brokenness of the human family and the demands of Catholic teaching, particularly in the domain of morality, including human sexuality, marriage, and family life. The recent synodal report indicates that many of our own people – for varied reasons – have difficulties accepting Church teaching. While we as Teachers can articulate right doctrine in a more attractive and comprehensible way, so that the faithful may receive it, we also need to accompany them along the path so that they live their faith in a way that offers them peace of heart, experiencing the true, the good, and the beautiful.

In *Amoris Laetitia* (cf. 302), Pope Francis references the *law of gradualness*, which had been emphasized by Pope John Paul II more than forty years ago in *Familiaris consortio* (cf. FC, 34), when he wrote:

And so, what is known as 'the law of gradualness' or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with 'gradualness of the law,' as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations. In God's plan, all husbands and wives are called in marriage to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God's command with serene confidence in God's grace and in his or her own will. (POPE JOHN PAUL II, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *FAMILIARIS CONSORTIO*, 22 NOVEMBER 1981)

In other words, we show respect for persons, not by abolishing objective standards of morality, but by helping everyone to recognize the call to holiness and creating the conditions by which they can live their call, offering them the tools in their concrete situations to pursue holiness and accept responsibility.

A growth in personal maturity and holiness can help the whole Church in the United States as it enters the continental phase of the synodal process, which demands discernment. The synodal process exists to help us evangelize.

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis invited every particular church to enter into a process of discernment, purification and reform so that the missionary impulse of the Church might be more focused, generous, and fruitful, adding that the important thing is “to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment” (*EG*, 30; 33).

A Path Forward for the Church in the United States

Up to this point, I have tried to offer some orientations from what Pope Francis has outlined during his almost ten years as Pope. But what does this mean as we look ahead to where we are going as the People of God? What is it that, as Pastors, we have to offer?

In the Acts of the Apostles, Simon Peter says, “*I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have, I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!*” (Acts 3:6). We cannot be paralyzed by the challenges that we face, because what we offer – the One we offer – has the words of everlasting life. It is ultimately He who has the capacity to transform lives, and it is our task to facilitate an encounter with Him – to proclaim Him who brings us joy.

Pope Francis suggests that “Joy is the effect of a deep experience of God, of an encounter with Him, when we allow God to take us beyond ourselves to reach

our truest being. There is the spring of evangelizing action. Because, if someone has welcomed that love that gives him back the meaning of life, how can he contain the desire to communicate it to others?" (*EG 8*).

Evangelizing is not so much a mandate imposed from outside, as the spontaneous reaction of those who have perceived the meaning of the Gospel and the encounter with Jesus, capable of transforming lives. Those who have encountered Jesus know also how to love their brothers and sisters. This is why in *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope used the parable of the Good Samaritan. The path forward, especially in a country with such a rich history of welcoming the stranger and offering freedom and opportunity, is to open our hearts to all – from the unborn, to the disabled, to the elderly, to those of other faiths.

The path forward demands this love, which ultimately requires an adequate anthropological vision. Pope Francis rightly laments the throwaway culture, offering in its place the broader vision of the Gospel, which is truly good news about man and woman, about marriage and family life, and about the human person in relationship to all of creation. We cannot be silent about these fundamental and saving truths.

Recently, the *Catechumenal Pathways for Matrimonial Life* were published. The Church in the United States, clergy and laity, can be a protagonist in the future of civilization by accompanying men and women along the course of their engagement and married life, so that they can be builders of communion and stewards of the gift of life and creation.

The encyclical letter *Laudato si*, at its core, presents creation as a gift for all, demanding of us a united effort in the care of our common home, rather than simply using and abusing the world and its resources. This conspicuous consumption, often accompanied by a reductive individualism, degenerates ultimately into the dehumanization of the person. The Church in the United States can offer the People of God an integral vision of the human being and his place in the world; what the Pope has called an *integral ecology*, which encompasses not only the dignity of the human person as the crown of creation but also the social dimension of life on this earth. The social dimension – concern for our brothers and sisters – is ultimately a Christian dimension, which helps awaken the conscience of others to the needs and the plight of many of our brothers and sisters and can be an effective instrument for overcoming selfishness that leads to unjust exclusion, especially economic exclusion, in society.

Finally, the Church in the United States is beginning to think and live in a synodal way. It is not without its growing pains, but it involves listening, understanding, and patience. It necessarily demands dialogue in a concrete and respectful manner. It seems to me that much of the division in the country, in neighborhoods, and in our families, and even in the Church, comes from the fact that we have forgotten how to be with one another and to speak with one another.

Of course, we are conditioned to want immediate results, but they are not always forthcoming. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (n. 236), Pope Francis uses the interesting image of a polyhedron (rather than a sphere) to emphasize the idea of integrating the richness of the diversity of communities. With its many faces touching one another, a polyhedron speaks of the encounter of ideas, cultures, and traditions, which can help build bridges and build community rather than divide. Without imposing a homogeneity, the Church in the United States can *integrate* the gifts of the People of God through dialogue and with patience, thus living in a creative tension.

We can sometimes get locked into “crisis thinking” and “crisis talk”; but if one looks at history, in God’s provident design, the Church constantly lives through and emerges from such experiences of anguish. Indeed, moments of crisis can permit us to discern the presence of the Lord and to refocus on the mission and on where we are going together. May our common discernment, in these challenging times, lead us to give a faith-filled answer to the question: “Where are we?” and more importantly, to the question: “Where are we going?”

Thank you for your kind attention.