

Presidential Address
(November 2023)

Your Eminence Cardinal Pierre
Your Eminences,
Dear Brother Bishops,
Sisters and Brothers all,

“Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the Churches.” (Rev. 2:7).

As you know, several of us spent the month of October at the Plenary Assembly of the Synod on Synodality. Later in the agenda, you will have an opportunity to hear from some of those who participated. It was certainly an opportunity to interact and speak about many themes from representatives from around the world. Different cultures and different perceptions always enrich. It is important, however, to listen to each other.

Personally, I saw many old friends and met new ones. I was also painfully reminded of the needs of so many younger Churches. It would be a delight to help all of them, but sadly we do not always have the means or the structures to meet those needs. The Synod did stress how much we can work together as parts of the Body of Christ.

At the same time, I reflected on the many synodal realities that already exist in the Church in the United States. The collegial atmosphere that characterizes these assemblies, the excellent consideration and interaction that typifies the work of the National Advisory Council, the work of diocesan pastoral councils, presbyteral councils, review boards, school board and so many other organizations come readily to mind.

One might also think about the committees of this conference. At least those on which I have served, the interaction among bishops, staff, and consultants have been active, healthy, and extremely useful. While it is true that only the bishop members vote, they do so after a robust exchange among all of the participants.

That is not to say that we do not have to grow and open ourselves to new possibilities, but we recognize and build on what is already present. We open our hearts to the action of the Holy Spirit and we listen to that voice.

Certainly, we pray that the Prince of Peace might enlighten those who determine the fate of the nations. We look out on our world and see so much armed conflict. We prayed for peace yesterday morning at our opening Mass and I know that we are ready to advocate for a lasting peace.

Our thoughts turn readily to the Holy Land, sacred to all three monotheistic religions. We recognize and defend the right of Israel to exist and to enjoy a place among the Nations. At the same time we know that the Palestinians, who represent the majority of Christians in the Holy Land—while still being a minority, have a right to a land that is their own. The Holy See has long advocated for that right and we also plead for them.

We know that Lebanon has long shouldered the burden of millions of refugees. They too are the object of our prayers and advocacy. Syria also suffers an extreme situation, but it has almost been

forgotten in the deliberations of the powerful. Our country has enforced sanctions, but they mean that the ruling class still has what it needs and the poor cannot find fuel to cook a meal or propel a vehicle. There, too, we pray and we urge a just solution.

Certainly, the Knights and Ladies of the Holy Sepulchre, the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, the Bethlehem Hospital, and other charities make concrete our commitment to those who suffer and also involve Catholics in our Nation in a personal way in the suffering in the Holy Land and among her neighbors.

So also we join our Ukrainian sisters and brothers in their struggle against unjust aggression. Our prayer has been coupled with humanitarian relief and collaboration with both organizations of Caritas in the war-torn nation. We are grateful for the presence of our brother bishop in our midst. Peace seems so far away, but we continue to pray and to keep our national leaders aware of the plight of the innocent in Ukraine. Pope Francis urged us again Sunday in the Angelus not to forget those who suffer in that martyred land.

Unfortunately, it would be easy to continue to list the areas of conflict in our world. It touches the African continent and beyond. Cardinal Bo from Myanmar, with whom I spent some days in a small group at the Synod, spoke about the delicate nature of their situation and the kid gloves that should be used to speak about it.

I do not want to forget the oppression against the Church in Nicaragua and the imprisonment of Bishop Alvarez there. At the same time, the situation in Haiti is still a concern despite the passage of time. Some wonder if any solution is possible.

It is good that the Committee on International Justice and Peace works tirelessly at least to keep the bishops abreast of the developments in these situations and to encourage within the limits of what is possible avenues of dialogue and assistance.

As Successors of the Apostles we participate in the mandate that Christ gave at the Ascension: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Mt. 28:19-20a).

It continues to be a daunting task. We strive to meet people and find ways to invite them to participate in the life of the community of faith. I think of the many new ways that have been discovered in our days. The archdiocese entrusted to me has been blessed by the ministry of FOCUS missionaries at four of the service academies and the impact has been extremely positive. Their ability to walk with the students, spark their faith life, and accompany them to a deeper level of faith commitment is extraordinary.

We all know that more can be done and we are making a national effort with the Eucharistic Revival to call our daughters and sons home to the fullness of life in Christ in the sacraments. On behalf of all of the bishops I thank all of those who strive to instill vibrancy, commitment, and renewal into our faith communities while reaching out to the peripheries at the same time.

On the front lines of these efforts are our committed priests on fire with the Gospel. They are our first collaborators and we are so dependent on their tireless efforts. It is good to see their contribution to preaching the Gospel and reaching out to those who still have to hear about Jesus

Christ. They motivate so much of the charitable outreach of the Church and the mission to preach the good news.

Just today I received a message from one of those fine priests. He wrote: “I have been assigned to the 5th Special Forces Group at Fort Campbell, KY. This is my second time serving with the Green Berets, the most professional, wise, and motivated individuals who give so much of themselves every day, encouraging me to love and serve them and their families unconditionally. We are on the constant cycle of deployments to the Middle East—Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and so forth.

I am currently in [an undisclosed location] where one-night US strikes are taking place. In the midst of all kinds of adversities, uncertainty, dodging drones and rockets, the ability to offer solace and the sacraments is a source of profound joy and peace. The bonds formed through shared moments of prayer and deep conversations create a unique camaraderie that transcends the ordinary. Every encounter becomes the opportunity to be an extension of God’s presence, bringing the comfort of faith to those who selflessly serve our nation.

“Father X is also deployed. We had a chance to see each other a few days ago and share some fellowship and enjoy priestly brotherhood.”

We are also encouraged by young men preparing in the seminaries. Not all of them are filled to overflowing like Mount St. Mary’s in Emmitsburg, but I continue to be impressed by these fine seminarians who commit themselves to knowing the Lord more deeply and to being men for others. They are a sign of hope for the future.

We try to support one another in this commitment to preaching the Gospel. We are unified in our commitment to Jesus Christ and His Gospel. We may approach the mission in different ways, but we are convinced that our mandate is to bring everyone to an experience of Jesus Christ, which leaves no one indifferent or the same.

May our time together, a rather full agenda, and the many opportunities for fraternal exchanges enrich each of us and send us home with renewed zeal for the mission we have in common. Perhaps we can return emboldened by the example of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, as Archbishop Sartain urged us to do in his reflection yesterday morning. She never really let anything stop her.

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