

HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AFRICAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC CLERGY & RELIGIOUS IN THE UNITED STATES
HOLY MASS FOR THURSDAY OF THE 12TH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
HOUSTON, TEXAS
JUNE 27, 2024

Brothers and Sisters,

It has been good to be with you today; and I am grateful for the opportunity to celebrate this Eucharist with you as we close today's meetings. We are here at this Convention to "build bridges"; and there is no greater way of building bridges than by sharing the Eucharist together. With all of our mutually enriching differences, we are one Body in Christ.

In the Church's liturgical calendar, today is the optional memorial of a leader who was called to build bridges: Saint Cyril of Alexandria, a 5th-century Bishop in north Africa, which was such an important region during the early centuries of the Church. Cyril was Bishop during a time of very difficult division. The Church's pastors were confronted by the teachings of the bishop Nestorius, who falsely separated the divinity and humanity of Christ. Cyril, who was known for his learning, argued for a correct understanding of Christ as one Person with two natures, human and divine. On that basis, he defended the belief in Mary as Mother of God. As the Pope's representative to the Council of Ephesus in 431, he affirmed these truths and condemned the heresy of Nestorianism.

In spite of Cyril's theological orthodoxy, if we were to watch some of Cyril's actions, it might not be immediately evident to us that he was a saint. In his early years of ministry, he could be very harsh toward his theological adversaries and vindictive toward the opponents of the Church. After being deposed and imprisoned for a time after the Council of Ephesus, Cyril resumed his role as Bishop and exhibited greater patience with those who were in error. He became known for his moderation, not allowing extreme partisan factions to control the direction of the Church. In this way he became a builder of bridges: never compromising the truth

of God’s revelation, but making communion in that truth as accessible as possible for those who were seeking the face of the Lord.

Unity among believers – with a goal of unity among all people – is central to the teachings of Jesus, who prayed to the Father that all of his followers would be one.¹ Jesus confronted issues of division among his own Apostles, teaching them the unity that they needed to have, grounded in the mission of service of their fellow human beings.² Unity in the Church, then, is part of that firm rock upon which Jesus, in today’s Gospel, says our spiritual house must be built. Boasting among fellow Catholics that our particular approach is the “right way”...contentious claims that others have it wrong...and attachment to ideology: these divisive attitudes weaken the Church, whose unified witness of a poor, self-sacrificing, and joyful Christ is so needed in this world, in which many people’s sense of God has become obscured. To build bridges, first of all with fellow Catholics and then toward those who are not in full communion with us: this work is essential to our mission. If we hope to transmit the true faith to people of our generation, then they must see that there really is a place for them among us, and that they are being invited to join us.

Laws and precepts, by themselves, are not the solid rock that some within the Church think they are. Are they necessary? Of course. But laws and precepts have no saving life in themselves. They must come from, and be infused with, the love of Christ, who is always here to encounter us, and who desires to encounter others through us. Without the love of Christ – a love which always *goes out*: to the poor, to the one who is not fully integrated, to the person on the “outside” – without such love, laws and precepts are like rigid stone that erodes into sand. No spiritual “house” can rest on this. Such rigidity sometimes takes the form of “an inflexible religiosity”, which the Pope says “takes away from us that freedom in the Spirit that Christ’s redemption gives us.”³ We must beware of this, and make sure that we are building our “house” on the firmness of Christ’s actual presence in our midst – a presence which is not an idea, but is discerned by looking at the reality before us.

¹ See *John* 17:21.

² See *Matthew* 20:20-28; *Mark* 9:33-37; *Luke* 22:24-26.

³ General Audience, 1 September 2021.

Today's Gospel passage is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, which we have been listening to at Mass for the last couple of weeks. The core theme of the Sermon was indicated in the opening lines: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."⁴ Jesus emphasized this theme later when he said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides."⁵ The Sermon is the compendium explaining to us concretely what it means to live the Gospel – what it means to follow that "style of God" which is demonstrated by Christ, who is himself the kingdom of God made flesh. Living the way Christ lived: poor in spirit, dedicated not only to the letter but the spirit of the law, and detached from everything except God – this is the ultimate way of building bridges and connections with our brothers and sisters in the Church, and in the human family. Because Jesus Christ himself, present in this Eucharist, *is* the Bridge between humanity and God.

⁴ *Matthew* 5:3.

⁵ *Matthew* 6:33.