

**MESSAGE OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE CONVOCATION OF CATHOLIC LEADERS
THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL IN AMERICA
ORLANDO, FLORIDA - JULY 4, 2017**

We have drawn to the end of this Convocation of Catholic Leaders. At the beginning of this assembly, as the representative of the Holy Father Pope Francis, I brought you his greetings and blessings. Pope Francis dreams of a Church which journeys together, marked by honesty in speech and by listening – to the flock, to the bishops, to the Holy Father and, above all, to what the Spirit has to say. (Rev 2:7) This convocation has all the marks of, what the Holy Father says, “*God expects of the Church of the third millennium.*” Indeed, the pastoral plan of the Holy Father in *Evangelii Gaudium* is what God expects, and as one theologian recently said, “If you don’t think Francis is the cure, you don’t grasp the disease.”

Yes, we want to think with the Pope and the mind of Christ. I want to thank the bishops for organizing this event, as well as the many others who contributed to its success. Cardinal Wuerl reminded us that one mark of an evangelizing disciple is connectedness with the Church – with the bishops here in America and with the Pope. This is truly a unique event and moment in the life of the Church in America. In the opening Mass, Cardinal Dolan described the moment as “ripe.” We might also say that this is a “*kairos*” moment – a new Catholic moment, a privileged time to be renewed for the mission of evangelization in this country. We have had the opportunity to exercise synodality by listening. So, what have we heard?

We have heard that the mission has to be carried out in a changing landscape. Quoting the *Aparecida* document, which Pope Francis quotes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Archbishop Gomez mentioned that we live not so much in “age of change but in a change of age.” Our times – and we need to be attentive to “the signs of the times” – are marked by profound cultural shifts: the reconfiguration of family life and roles; the erosion of communal life and an ever-greater push toward individualism; a decline in respectful dialogue and a rise in ideologies and culture wars; and increasing secularization seen in nearly 25% of Americans identifying as “nones” and 20 million Catholics, especially millennials identifying themselves in this way. The landscape is changing, with migrants coming from the global south to the United States, especially the South and West just as many parishes in the Northeast and Midwest are losing population and consolidating. The landscape is changing due to advances in technology and transportation, but globalization has not brought about a greater closeness among peoples. Truly, the United States is mission territory. It is challenging but not impossible – *with God all things are possible*. (cf. Matthew 19:26-27)

We ought not to despair, for we are called to be a Church of missionary disciples, a Church that goes forth in the power of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Rather than disengage and retreat from the cultural and spiritual challenges, God has given the Church in the United States a new opportunity to be his witnesses and to bring the joy of the Gospel to others – to be in a permanent state of mission. The Gospel, as Archbishop Lori said yesterday, must go forth, creatively and respectfully engaging the culture, purifying it, and ennobling it with truly human values. God and the Holy Father call us to move beyond being a self-referential Church – managing a slow decline, living in “maintenance mode” – to being a Church that goes forth to present Jesus to the world. Yes, the “heart of the human person needs something that only Christ can give.”

To carry out that mission with authenticity, which is something that the “nones” are seeking, we must, as Bishop Caggiano, Carl Anderson, and others have said, commit ourselves to going inward – to encountering Christ ourselves and committing ourselves to holiness of life. There is a need for ongoing personal and pastoral conversion to Christ.

For us, the encounter with Christ changes everything, and if it can change everything for us, it can change everything for our brothers and sisters. At Adoration, Cardinal O'Malley quoted Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est*:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (BENEDICT XVI, ENCYCLICAL LETTER *DEUS CARITAS EST*, 25 DECEMBER 2005, 1)

Our Christian identity is the fruit of an encounter that gives direction to our lives. Nevertheless, the Christian, Pope Francis warns, must guard against complacency, isolation and self-absorption:

Faith by nature is not self-absorbed; it 'goes out'. It seeks understanding; it gives rise to testimony; it generates mission. (ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS, MEETING WITH THE BISHOPS OF ASIA, 17 AUGUST 2014)

It is the personal encounter with Jesus before whose gaze “all falsehood falls away” (cf. POPE BENEDICT XVI, ENCYCLICAL LETTER *SPE SALVI*, 47) that can change everything for the Church in the United States. Repeatedly we heard, the answer is “Jesus.” As missionary disciples, we should not be afraid of sharing what Jesus has done for us and for all of humanity *and* what the Church in the United States has done and continues to do for those at the peripheries.

To be a missionary disciple implies – whether we are a bishop, priest, deacon, religious, or layperson – being a disciple first – learning from the Master and evangelizing using the “method modeled by the Master.” As missionary disciples, we go forth – to the peripheries – to the “Samaritan fields” that are ripe to gather an abundant harvest for the Lord. We go forth to share the Good News – not as “sourpusses” but with joy. *How happy are the feet of those who bring Good News.* (Romans 10:15)

We go forth to the peripheries – not only to the geographic peripheries but also to the existential peripheries, to those people who suffer from isolation, woundedness, sin, addiction, and callous indifference – who suffer from the rotten fruits of neglect, exploitation, and injustice. They must know that *Life is Worth Living*, discovering through our witness the “tenderness of God”, the “Merciful Face of the Father”, which He showed us in His Beloved Son, Jesus, who is the answer to our hearts’ deepest questions and longing.

We go forth, beyond our “comfort zone” to those places “*where we do not wish to go.*” (John 21:18) We go forth, like the Good Shepherd, in search of the lost, the forgotten, the migrant, the discarded – to reaffirm that they matter to us and to God! Every life matters! Missionary disciples are witnesses that there is room in the family of God for people of every race and land. This witnessing begins with ourselves, our families, communities and parishes, which are essentially missionary and in which we can experience and share God’s love.

We go forth, but we do not go forth alone. Jesus sent his disciples two by two. *Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.* (Matthew 18:20)

We go forth in the power of the Holy Name of Jesus with boldness – with audacity, as “children of the light.”

We go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit, the perfect love of God who casts out all fear, to bring comfort and healing to the wounded. We as a Church, acting as a “field hospital”, bring the gifts of mercy and peace, which the world cannot give, to the wounded. The Holy Spirit is our traveling companion, who transformed the disciples from being trapped in fear, to being bold, prophetic witnesses, proclaiming the joy of the Gospel, “which fills the hearts of all who believe.” (CF. *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 1)

A keyword for the Pontificate of Pope Francis, emerging from *Evangelii Gaudium*, is “accompany.” God accompanies us in our mission and we, the Church, in turn accompany the whole human family in a pilgrimage of faith. Last night, a young woman named Audrey (Assad) sang these words: *You walk with me. You never leave. You’re making my heart a garden.* What if everyone said this of God or of His Church? How different the landscape would be! It could be a garden – full of life, rich in fruit!

Our experience at this convocation has been one of journeying together, rediscovering and strengthening our common bonds along this journey of faith. This convocation has reawakened our collective conscience to the plight of the poor, the persecuted, and those at the peripheries. Now we journey together, united, renewed by this convocation, witnesses to the power of Jesus’ prayer: *That all may be one ... so that the world might believe.* (John 17:21)

As the Apostolic Nuncio, I am here to remind you that Pope Francis, the Successor of Saint Peter, also accompanies you! Our mission is not easy; it is just beginning. No one is exempted. There is no such thing, to quote Sherry Weddell, as “vocational unemployment!” You will return to your dioceses, parishes, ministries, and families to continue the conversation. I encourage you to share what you have heard and experienced. This is the beginning of something new and beautiful – a *kairos* moment. This is your moment! Share what the Spirit has said to you and to the Church, especially by the witness of your lives.

As the Apostolic Nuncio, I will also have the pleasure of announcing to the Holy Father, how the Spirit is alive in the Church in the United States. I will tell him of the commitment of the many missionary disciples and their love for Jesus. I will report that this nation – filled with such rich diversity, blessed with liberty, and which today celebrates her birthday – is filled with courageous witnesses to the joy of the Gospel.

I commend all of you to the intercession of the Blessed and Immaculate Virgin Mary, who appeared at Guadalupe – at the peripheries – to bring joy to a whole continent. I commend you to the Star of the New Evangelization: that learning from her example, you may be joyful missionary disciples. To all gathered here and to your families, the Holy Father imparts His Apostolic Blessing wishing you peace and joy as you are sent forth on your mission.

But I have said enough! I conclude, not with the words of a Pope, nor a bishop, nor a theologian, but with the words of a small boy, the son of Julianne Stanz, who saw people in line for Communion and shouted, “Come on, people! Let’s get moving for Jesus!”

[Go forth and announce the Gospel of the Lord! God bless you.]