

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
TO THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
PLENARY ASSEMBLY, JUNE 11, 2019
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND**

My Dear Brothers in Christ,

I greet you in the name of Pope Francis and assure you of his fraternal support and prayers as you gather for your June assembly. I regret that I cannot join you, but the Holy Father has called, in these days, all the Apostolic Nuncios to Rome to strengthen the bonds of communion between the Successor of Saint Peter and his personal representatives to all the Churches and governments around the world. As you can well understand, I could not miss it, but I wanted to assure you of my prayers and to share a few thoughts as you begin your gathering.

When I addressed you in November, you had been asked to postpone a vote on new norms and protocols until at least after the Summit on the Protection of Minors, which was to be held in February. We all remember that there were “some” expressions of “dissent” about that. I recognize that at that time you did not have all the elements necessary to see clearly what the Holy Father hoped to accomplish. I would say that among the reasons the Holy Father asked for a delay was his belief that the whole Church needed to walk together – to act in a synodal way, and that this “walking together” of the whole Church, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, would make the path forward clearer.

As you know, the Greek word *synodos* means “to be on the journey together” as in a caravan or religious pilgrimage (Luke 2:41-44). Biblically, the Council of Jerusalem is the “primordial and fundamental model” of synodality. At that time, the primitive church wrestled with the influx of Gentiles and the dictates of the Law. The Apostles and elders met to consider, discuss, and debate matters. After consulting with one another and the Holy Spirit, a consensus was reached. Peter presided over the assembly. James presided over the local church. Others, like Paul and Barnabas, participated. Here was a demonstration of reciprocity of charisms, a mutual interdependence between the ministerial priesthood and the royal priesthood of the baptized, that produced a solution for the People of God. Following the example of the Apostles and elders, we *and* the Holy Spirit can arrive at truly pastoral solutions to complex problems.

I believe that our journey together as a Church, walking in the Spirit, helps us to have perspective on what has been happening in the months that have transpired

since November. It seems to me that Pope Francis' emphasis on synodality and walking together is a manifestation of four principles articulated in *Evangelii Gaudium* (nn. 222-237): *Time is greater than space* (nn. 222-225); *Unity prevails over conflict* (nn. 226-230); *Realities are more important than ideas* (nn. 231-233); *and the whole is greater than the part* (nn. 234-237). The context of these postulates is his treatment of the common good and the promotion of peace, but these principles apply to both the world *and* the Church. Led by the Spirit, the journey together concretizes these four principles.

The first principle: *Time is greater than space*. Pope Francis understands time as having to do with fullness as an expression of a horizon which opens before us. People live in the tension between limited, individual moments and the expanding horizon with its promise. This is perhaps particularly true in the United States, where life is fast paced. Technology and social media condition us to desire an immediate response to practically everything. The idea that time is greater than space is a useful remedy. In an ecclesial context, faster responses do not always produce the best results. While not wanting to be slow or to neglect our responsibilities, we need to be thoughtful, prudent, and united. A rush to judgement, even for the sake of transparency, is never a guarantee of justice or a good result.

Careful, methodical work, which includes the patient endurance of setbacks, may be the vehicle through which the tension is overcome. The perspective offered by time and reflection allows for a lasting, fruitful, lived experience rather than a quick, passing moment that yields little. The priority of time over space means initiating a process which leads to further discussion and concrete, effective action. Over time, individuals become more familiar with one another and learn how to listen more attentively to others. Listening and reflecting takes time.

On a journey, time is required to reach the destination, but as time elapses certain things crystallize. Things that were not immediately clear become clearer through prayerful reflection. Journeying together takes time, but at the proper time, the Spirit will lead the Church to that place where she needs to be to proclaim the Gospel effectively.

Consider what the situation was like in November. Certainly, the pressure from members of your flocks, from the media, and even civil authorities to act quickly was great. In his paternal care, the Holy Father believed that both prayer and time were necessary to adequately address the matter as a Church – together with all the other churches throughout the world. His concern and affection were manifest in

his call for a retreat— to be together and to pray together as bishops. Although he could not fulfill his desire to be with you for that retreat, he sent Father Cantalamessa to guide you spiritually, so that renewed spiritually you might discern the path forward.

At the beginning of the retreat, the Holy Father wrote a letter of encouragement, desirous to strengthen the bonds of communion. There, he wrote:

“With these few lines, I would like to draw near to you as a brother and to reflect with you on some aspects that I consider important, while at the same time encouraging your prayer and the steps you are taking to combat the ‘culture of abuse’ and to deal with the crisis of credibility. ... combatting the culture of abuse, the loss of credibility, the resulting bewilderment and confusion, and the discrediting of our mission urgently demands of us a renewed and decisive approach to resolving conflicts.”

Appreciative of the Holy Father’s deep concern for the pastoral situation in the United States and around the world, I know many found the retreat worthwhile and grace-filled. One bishop who had initially been skeptical of the need for a retreat wrote the following in his diocesan newspaper:

“The seven-day retreat went by far too quickly. We did not conduct any business, discuss any proposals, or take any votes. We just listened for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This was one of the most meaningful retreats I have ever attended. Fr. Cantalamessa ended his last meditation saying to us, ‘now every time I have an opportunity to address priests and bishops, I proclaim that word of God again. And once more, not as a quotation, but as the living active word of God. And so I dare to do it again at the close of this retreat: Take courage, you bishops of the United States; take courage priests, deacons, and all the people of this land: and work, I am with you, says the Lord.’

Pope Francis was right. We needed to gather and pray.”

I too want to offer encouragement. Having just celebrated the Solemnity of Pentecost, we know the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Openness to the Holy Spirit helps the Church find the right path. As bishops, we can examine how the Spirit has been and is present and active in our collective ministry and begin to take steps forward together.

The second principle: *Unity prevails over conflict*. Our “walking together” provides us with the opportunity to speak and to listen. Each person must be willing to speak honestly and without hesitation. Differing opinions and conflict will emerge. This cannot be ignored, concealed, or disregarded, but even in these differences, it is important not to lose sight of the profound unity we share. The Holy Spirit keeps the Church united even amid honest disagreements. When one’s point of view does not prevail, the temptation will emerge to simply walk away or to isolate ourselves within our own dioceses rather than search for a constructive way forward.

Nevertheless, through a spirit-filled and sometimes tense discussion, unity can prevail over conflict. Just as important as speaking is listening. Listening involves deepening a sense of solidarity with others engaged in confronting similar problems in their respective dioceses, contemplating Christ, who reconciles all things in Himself, and attention to the voice of the Spirit, who leads us into all Truth. The Holy Spirit harmonizes diverse perspectives to overcome conflict. The success of the Council of Jerusalem provides confidence that in the Spirit, unity prevails over conflict.

Consider how the Spirit has been at work since that memorable retreat. In February, the Summit on Protection of Minors was held in Rome. As heads of episcopal conferences from around the world gathered, the experience of your conference could be shared with the others, and the President and some other members of your conference were able to learn from others. Through attentive listening to the Spirit and to one another, together the whole Church was able to take steps – to walk together – to address this problem and concrete actions could begin – without one group running ahead of the others and another lagging too far behind. At the conclusion of the Summit, the Holy Father promised concrete actions.

This brings us to the third principle: *Realities are more important than ideas*. The Holy Father calls the whole Church to walk together in this moment of crisis, fully acknowledging that “the crimes of sexual abuse offend Our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm the community of the faithful.” There can be no hesitation in responding vigorously as a matter of justice – Pope Francis reminds us – noting as well that the “discrediting of our mission urgently demands of us a renewed and decisive approach to resolving conflicts.” It is understandable that, given the sense of urgency, many of the Church’s already limited resources are being expended to tackle this problem. Yet,

the many pastoral priorities and even successes of the Church in the United States cannot fade into the distance and should receive full attention.

For example, the National Encuentro was a long process, culminating in our gathering last Autumn, but there we also spoke about the “post-Encuentro” period. How will our local churches respond to the continued presence of Hispanics and utilize their gifts to meet the challenges of our communities? Similarly, we speak of our concerns regarding the “nones”, and the Holy Father invited us to take a serious interest in young people and vocations, leading to the recent Synod, which was crowned by the Exhortation *Christus Vivit*. In the same spirit of collegiality, are we ready to respond to the urgent necessities of the Church in these new and changing times? What will we do concretely for our youth? What actions will we take to develop a culture of vocations? The People of God are hungry for faith. Many of you, I know, have prepared or are preparing your *Ad Limina* Reports. Is it simply a report; or rather, are we afforded the opportunity to take stock of our situations, to analyze what is happening in our local churches, and to begin again? These are but a few examples of pastoral opportunities that we cannot afford to squander, because the People of God are hungering and thirsting for Jesus Christ and the Gospel more than ever.

We must meet our people in their concrete situations, proposing the life-giving Word to them as a sure guide for understanding their experiences and for guiding their moral and spiritual lives. Ideas disconnected from reality, Pope Francis warns “give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action.” (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 232).

The process of discussing and listening leads to concrete solutions rather than simply expounding theological ideas. This certainly was the case following the Summit in February. Flowing from the reflection and collaboration of the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences, three documents emerged: the first was regarding the protection of minors and vulnerable adults in the Vatican City; the second was an Apostolic Letter in the form of *Motu proprio* applying the norms to the Roman Curia; and the third provided Guidelines for the Vicariate of the Vatican City. These were promulgated to “reinforce the protection of minors by strengthening the normative framework.”

Reaping more fruit from the February Summit, Pope Francis issued his Apostolic Letter entitled, “*Vos estis lux mundi*”. In his introduction to *Vos estis*, the

Holy Father echoes what I said last November and of which you are certainly aware, namely that this responsibility, even if it seems heavy, is mainly yours:

“This responsibility falls, above all, on the successors of the Apostles, chosen by God to be pastoral leaders of his People, and demands from them a commitment to follow closely the path of the Divine Master. Because of their ministry, in fact, Bishops *‘as vicars and legates of Christ govern the particular churches entrusted to them by their counsel, exhortations, example, and even by their authority and sacred power, which indeed they use only for the edification of their flock in truth and holiness, remembering that he who is greater should become as the lesser and he who is chief become as the servant’* (cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 27).”

Though each of you has the responsibility of governing his own diocese, these universal procedures will help the whole Church confront the question of abuse and healing together. Even as an episcopal conference, within this framework, together you can collegially and prudently discern the right path forward, mindful of the Second Vatican Council’s words that “the individual bishops represent each his own church, but all of them together with the Pope represent the entire Church in the bond of peace, unity, and love.” (SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, 23)

Perhaps, you have noticed my use of the word *together*. Personally, I believe that the body of bishops is stronger and more effective working together and walking together. Since the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Francis has called for a synodal Church – a Church that walks together.

This opens the way to the fourth principle: *The whole is greater than the part*. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (236), Pope Francis describes the world, not as a sphere but as a polyhedron, which “reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.” A polyhedron has many different faces that are connected one to another at the edges. Each surface preserves its uniqueness and identity, shows its differences with respect to the others, yet, the whole polyhedron remains a single unit.

The same model can be applied to the Church and its members, with their different charisms. Each person retains his or her uniqueness, personality, and gifts, but through baptism, each is inserted into a community, one which maintains a unity in diversity. In a church that walks together, members are interconnected, engaged

in honest speech and attentive listening, in search of the common good and the pastoral strategy that leads everyone to a new horizon.

Consider an example from scouting. When scouts are hiking or climbing a mountain, the most important thing is not who gets to the top of the mountain first or most quickly, rather it is that all arrive at the destination safely, all reach the goal, and all remain together as a troop. Sometimes the fastest people must wait for the slowest. Other times, the slower members need encouragement to persevere and to arrive at their destination. Each person walks according to his abilities. The journey allows each person to gain perspective, reach the goal with others, and to enjoy – together – the view from the summit.

In the process of walking together, we also have the opportunity to hear from the different members of the group. Certainly, the Church needs to listen to the voices and insights of the lay faithful, to make visible the multi-faceted richness of the Church and to engage in a shared process with diversified responsibilities. A bishop cannot think that matters concerning the Church can be resolved by acting alone or exclusively among peers.

We cannot be dispensed of our obligations to hold ourselves accountable, but when we do confront our problems – with our clergy, religious, and laity – we do so as one Church – together – in light of the Gospel that we have received. The Gospel itself does not make our problems go away, yet in our relationship to Christ whom we know through the Gospel, the way we assume our responsibilities and face our challenges is different. Christ changes our humanity and helps us rise from our troubles. With Christ, together we can walk and face the realities of the Church today and together discern the path forward.

There is a path forward. We cannot afford to lose our many important initiatives and good works in the long, dark shadow cast by our problems. As we, the Church, are purified of wickedness and evil, let us not forget to be bold in proclaiming that so much of what we do is good and right.

The Good News is not just words. Each day hundreds of thousands of our people toil in the Lord's vineyard – in parishes, hospitals, schools, and in charitable works – and not just here, but throughout the world. The Church has much to offer in her works, but above all she offers salvation! The continued prayers, faith, and work of our people should give us courage. Do not be afraid! The Church is alive!

May the Holy Spirit of God, who descended like tongues of fire upon the Apostles at Pentecost, help us to be his witnesses - to be His Light!