

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
“CONTRIBUTIONS OF VIETNAMESE AMERICAN CATHOLICS
TO THE CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES”
8TH BIENNIAL VIETNAMESE PRIESTS’ CONVOCATION – “EMMAUS”
VIETNAMESE CATHOLIC CENTER, SANTA ANA, CALIFORNIA
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2019**

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father’s representative to the United States, I greet you in his name and express the closeness of Pope Francis as you gather for these days of prayer and reflection to strengthen your bonds of priestly fraternity and to reflect on the contribution of Vietnamese Priests to the life of the Church in the United States. I am grateful for the invitation of your President, Msgr. Joseph Trinh, and for the efforts of all who have contributed to the planning of this eighth biennial convocation of Vietnamese Priests in the United States.

In the three years since my appointment as Nuncio, I have traveled extensively around the United States, and I could not help but notice that the number of Vietnamese priests serving here is enormous. Certainly, in Orange, Houston, and New Orleans, the presence of Vietnamese clergy is significant. Many parishes in the United States have been revitalized or buoyed by the presence of Vietnamese Catholics, who continue to attend Mass and share in the life of the Church. In turn, through the practice of the faith, vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life continued to be nourished and nurtured in Vietnamese families.

This afternoon, I want to speak to you about the contributions of Vietnamese American Catholics to the life of the Church in the United States and then to propose some questions for you as Vietnamese Priests serving the Church in the United States.

Last September, I attended the Fifth National Encuentro, which was taking place in Grapevine, Texas. The large and growing presence of Hispanic Catholics in the United States is a reflection of the growing diversity in the United States. Three months ago, I went to Atlanta to address the African Conference of Clergy and Religious in the United States, because so many African priests and religious are now serving here too. Now, I find myself before a multitude of Vietnamese priests, and yet I am not surprised.

The diversity in the Church should not surprise us as ours is a universal, that is, *catholic* Church. At the same time, the gifts of the different members of the Church can be harmonized to advance the Kingdom of God and show forth the beauty of Christ; thus, the Church becomes the *sponsa ornata monilibus suis* (cf. Is 61:10).

As the Holy Father wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

“The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have one cultural expression, but ‘rather remaining true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures

and peoples in which it is received and takes root.’ In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the ‘beauty of her varied face.’” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 116)

Thus, I would say that the first contribution of Vietnamese Catholics to the Church in the United States is that they strengthen the Church’s catholicity. Vietnamese Catholics, while preserving their own cultural heritage and liturgical traditions, are able to live the faith as an expression of a gift received from God, even in the United States.

Vietnamese Catholics know how to celebrate what is best in their culture and show forth the beauty of God. This is most obvious in Vietnamese liturgical traditions, sacred music, popular piety and devotions, including processions. Inculturation, which involves the encounter of a culture with the Gospel; the appropriation of the best of that culture; and its enrichment by the Gospel, is truly a gift of the Spirit, which shows forth the newness of the face of the Church. This beauty can attract and, therefore, be a useful means of evangelization.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis again says:

“In the Christian customs of an evangelized people, the Holy Spirit adorns the Church showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face. Through inculturation, the Church ‘introduces peoples together with their cultures, into their own community’, for ‘every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood, and lived.’” (*EG*, 116)

Related to the catholicity manifested by the diversity the Vietnamese community brings to the Church in the United States is the ability to dialogue with others. Living in and being socialized in a cultural framework suffused with Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian values and moral codes, Vietnamese Catholics know how to dialogue and how to harmonize diverse religious systems and views, without sacrificing the truth, without losing their own identity, and while respecting the dignity of others.

This brings me to a second contribution of the Vietnamese American Catholics: they celebrate their diversity, while preserving unity; they contribute to the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ. Some groups take an “exclusivist” approach to their diversity, not allowing others to be enriched by their gifts. Some want to celebrate Mass or run a parish “their” way, so as to single themselves out, the way “gnostics” claimed to have “special knowledge.”

In contrast, Vietnamese American Catholics help to model unity within the Church. Listen to the words of the French Cardinal Henri de Lubac:

“Multiple or multiform, she (the Church) is nonetheless *one*, of a most active and demanding unity. She is a people, a great anonymous crowd and still the most personal of beings. Catholic, that is, universal, she wishes her members to be open to everything and yet she herself is never fully open but when she is withdrawn into the intimacy of her interior life and in the silence of adoration. She is humble and majestic. She professes a capacity to absorb every culture, to raise up their highest values; at the same time, we see her claim for her own the hearts and homes of the poor, the undistinguished, the simple and destitute masses. Not for an instant does she cease to contemplate Him who

is at once crucified and resurrected, the man of sorrows and lord of glory, vanquished by, but savior of, the world. He is her bloodied spouse and her triumphant master.” (HENRI DE LUBAC, *THE CHURCH: PARADOX AND MYSTERY*, TRANSL. JAMES R. DUNNE (STATEN ISLAND: ALBA HOUSE, 1969), 2.)

Vietnamese Catholics are inclusive of the poor and suffering. They offer to the whole body what is best in their culture and from their ethical tradition. Vietnamese priests too must manage not only Vietnamese parishes and communities, but “American” parishes. They try to understand different cultures and to adapt in order to evangelize. Often, they make a proposal of the most noble elements of their culture; rarely do they impose it upon others. This is especially true in a place like Orange, where in addition to the Anglo-American culture, there is a strong Latino presence. Vietnamese Catholics help preserve unity in the midst of diversity in the United States.

This is also true with respect to authority in the Church. One great blessing of the United States is the liberty and freedom it offers. Unfortunately, some, including priests, go too far, and individualism and self-interest begin to creep into the Church. Culturally (and religiously), Vietnamese people and priests have great esteem for their elders and their traditions. This esteem for elders and superiors, whether in the family or at work, is manifested ecclesially in respect for the hierarchy, in obedience to ecclesiastical authority, and in humble service, without a great need for affirmation. Vietnamese Catholics know how to live and work with others in the Church through their docility to the Spirit rather than bring disunity through self-assertion and promotion.

Third, Vietnamese Catholics contribute to the vibrancy of parish life. I have been reading the *Ad Limina* Reports of the different dioceses around the country. We see, especially in the Northeast and Midwest, a great decline in sacramental practice and participation in the life of the Church. In some dioceses, sacramental practice has dropped by 1/3 in just seven years! I imagine the attrition rate is not so high among Vietnamese Catholics who continue to have their children baptized. Cultural events and celebrations connected with the sacraments engage a larger parish community, especially at weddings, baptisms, First Communions, and funerals. New Year’s celebrations and death anniversaries are another way of keeping the family and communal bond strong.

This sense of community, of belonging to the Church, is further strengthened by the many confraternities, sodalities and pious associations of the faithful that exist among Vietnamese American Catholics. Historically, these groups thrived among the early waves of immigrant Catholics, but for some reason, after the Second Vatican Council, the Church in the United States watched fraternities and sodalities die. Perhaps, it was because Catholics were accepted in society that they began to fade. Mobility of people, many of whom do not have a strong tie to a parish, also contributed to their decline. In the Vietnamese community, these fraternities and sodalities continue to help build community and provide a reason for people to gather at the parish, beyond liturgical services, sports, or school. I think that Vietnamese American Catholics can help the Church in the United States recover some of these communal bonds.

Fourth, I believe that Vietnamese American Catholics contribute to evangelization through their personal witness and experience as a people. Many Vietnamese suffered terribly at the time of the fall of Saigon, experiencing torture and imprisonment. Vietnamese American Catholics know the experience of enduring persecution, fleeing as refugees, and suffering the loneliness that comes from being separated

from family, homeland, and culture. They know well the struggles of being immigrants and of linguistic difficulties, and yet they persevere.

This experience can enrich the Church in the United States, because among Vietnamese Catholics do not understand faith as merely a set of teachings or view it as something to be taken for granted. Faith is not lived as something purely formal or abstract; it is a lived reality. There has been an *existential* experience of suffering, which has led to greater conformity to the Crucified One; this experience has an evangelizing power. Stories of the heroic virtues of your elders in the faith are passed on from generation to generation. The power of these stories, like the power of the Gospel, can lead to the conversion of many in American society.

The Church in the United States is proud of her church buildings, schools, chancery offices, and charitable works. This is right and just, but sometimes I wonder if it has become too proud of its financial resources which have made some of these works possible. The recent scandals, financial losses, and bankruptcies related to clerical sexual abuse have humbled the Church in the United States. But Vietnamese Catholics know how to be the Church without the money, having been reduced to poverty and stripped of everything. The experience of this should be shared with the Church in the United States as an antidote for the worldliness that has infected the Church.

The experience of Vietnamese Catholics as migrants and refugees and overcoming the language barriers and struggles to find employment can also give hope to new migrants now coming from the global South. In his recent exhortation, following the Synod on Youth, the Holy Father wrote:

“Migration, considered globally, is a structural phenomenon, and not a passing emergency. It may occur within one country or between different countries. The Church’s concern is focused especially on those fleeing from war, violence, political or religious persecution, from natural disasters including those caused by climate change, and from extreme poverty. Many of them are young. In general, they are seeking opportunities for themselves and their families. They dream of a better future and they want to create the conditions for achieving it...” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *CHRISTUS VIVIT*, 25 MARCH 2019, 91)

As pastors, you have the experience of helping young people realize their dreams. Your experience helps you to demonstrate both solidarity and patience. While many young people will quickly appropriate the worst of this culture – materialism, individualism, and secularism – as priests, you are positioned to help new immigrants, whether from Vietnam or Central and South America, to stay close to the Lord even in their suffering and to point them to lasting and eternal values.

Fifth, beyond personal witness, I believe that Vietnamese American Catholics can help young people stay connected to the Church. These days we often hear about the “nones.” These aren’t the many Vietnamese religious sisters; rather, they are the baptized who no longer claim any religious affiliation whatsoever. Nearly 50% of those under age 30 who were baptized as Catholics identify as “nones.”

The Church in the United States is struggling to evangelize young people, and yet, while there are challenges among Vietnamese Catholic youth, the Vietnamese seem to be much more engaged. I am firmly convinced that movements, like the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement, help keep young people Eucharistically-centered. The Servant Leader Training Camps help build a culture of encounter for

youth with our Eucharistic Lord. They provide training for future leaders in the Church, thereby allowing young people to exercise leadership and make a valuable contribution to their peers and to their parishes. How the Church in the United States and parishes could benefit from this example!

The preservation and promotion of apostolates like the Apostleship of Prayer sustains the spiritual life of the young, increasing devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and reaching a central theme in the Pontificate of Pope Francis, namely mercy. Vietnamese American Catholics also know how to foster Marian piety. The Marian days held in Carthage, Missouri, draw 100,000 people. They not only foster devotion to Our Lady, but they allow Catholics to journey together as families and communities, to bring the scattered together in unity.

At the same time, they take the form of a pilgrimage. Of this, Pope Francis says:

Pilgrimage is a symbol of life. It makes us think of life as walking, as a path. If a person does not walk, but instead stays still, this is not useful; it accomplishes nothing. Think of water: when water is not in the river, it does not course, but instead it remains still and stagnates. A soul that does not walk in life doing good, doing many things that one must do for society, to assist others, or who does not walk through life seeking God and inspiration from the Holy Spirit, is a soul that finishes in mediocrity and in spiritual poverty. Please do not stand still in life! (POPE FRANCIS, MESSAGE TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE 37TH NOCTURNAL PILGRIMAGE FROM MACERATA TO LORETO, 6 JUNE 2015)

I believe that in some ways, the Church in the United States has become too sterile, devoid of piety and devotion. Hispanic Catholics and Vietnamese American Catholics, with their Marian devotion and pious practices, can help the Church in the United States recover its warmth and the incarnational reality of faith.

These then are a few ways that I believe that Vietnamese American Catholics can contribute to and enrich the Church in the United States. The Church is now calling you, as Vietnamese Priests, to be missionaries here. How lucky we are to have Pope Francis now, building on this call, to articulate his dream for a missionary Church, hoping that you will make it a reality! Pope Francis 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)

In his meeting with the Bishops of Vietnam during their *ad limina* visit last year, the Holy Father asked that the bishops bring the joy of evangelization to the Church in Vietnam. He spoke to them of having the “smell of the sheep,” the odor of God, inviting them to increase their efforts at prayer and contemplation and encouraging them to remain close to God, to the people, and, in a special way, to priests. There is no reason why that same approach could not be undertaken by you Vietnamese priests, laboring in the Lord’s Vineyard in the United States.

Pope Francis dreams not only of a missionary Church, but of a poor Church for the poor, a Church close to the abandoned and forgotten, a Church which conveys the tenderness of God. He wants an evangelical Church, called to measure itself constantly against the breadth and richness of the Gospel. He

wants a Church willing to go forth from its comfort zone (cf. *EG*, 20) to the spiritual and existential peripheries.

Often we think of these “peripheries” or “margins” as places of great poverty. Very often, they are; however, in this country, there is great material wealth and great spiritual poverty, a loss of transcendence, and an increasing fragmentation in society. It is to this periphery that the Lord and your superiors have sent you, with the wisdom from your spiritual tradition and culture. While no one culture can capture the diversity of the Church. The Church goes forth to make Christ known to others in their cultural situations. The Holy Father states:

When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to unity. The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity where all things find their unity ... Evangelization joyfully acknowledges these varied treasures which the Holy Spirit pours out upon the Church.” (*EG*, 117)

As Vietnamese Catholic Priests, working in the United States, you find yourself between two cultures and two churches – Vietnamese and American. There really is only one Church, but you understand what I mean. Even linguistically and generationally, you may experience yourself as being “in between” – that is, not at the center. That is okay, because in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis used the image of a polyhedron rather than sphere to describe the world.

A polyhedron, “reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 236) A polyhedron is a solid figure with many plane faces, usually more than six. The different faces are connected one to another at the edges. Each surface preserves its uniqueness and identity, which shows its differences with respect to the others, and yet, the whole polyhedron remains a single unit. This is the way Pope Francis views the world – as a common home – with many nations and peoples who are interconnected.

Some are living near the center; while others are living at the peripheries. Nevertheless, those near the center can offer what they have to those at the margins, and those at the margins can offer what they have to those at the centers, cooperating in an inter-dependent and fruitful way. Although you may feel “in between” or even at a periphery, there is an opportunity for connection, enrichment, and, therefore, dialogue and evangelization. By the way, you are being asked to share with the Church in the United States – whether you are near the middle, at the center, or at the periphery – the precious treasure of your culture and faith in the service of the its evangelizing mission.

In June, the Holy Father gathered the nuncios in Rome, and he gave us a “Decalogue” of qualities of a nuncio, which forced each of us to examine ourselves, posing difficult questions. As I said, a few months ago I addressed the Convention of the African Conference of Catholic Clergy and Religious in the United States. I posed some challenging questions to them, which I am adapting now for you as you reflect on the contributions that Vietnamese clergy and religious can make to the Church in the United States:

1. You have been called to be a missionary in the United States. Are you a missionary? That is, are you truly missionary or do you simply carry out tasks to maintain an existing system? What are you offering to the People of God here? Surely, many offer

the sacraments, catechesis and formation, but are you facilitating the encounter with Jesus Christ and doing so with apostolic zeal? What more are you called to do in living your specific vocation?

2. Integration can be a critical component to evangelization. Have I received the best of American culture or the worst of it? Appreciating the talents and gifts of the lay faithful can enrich our ministry. What have I received from the People of God and what have I contributed to them from my own culture?

You have certainly made a contribution to the Church here in the United States, but if you had to “name” the contribution, what would it be? Moreover, as we think about contributing to the Church in the United States, we should ask: what is my motivation? Is it for my glory or my personal gain; or on the contrary, is my motivation the service of the People of God, God’s glory, and to witness to the Gospel, making its values present in the lives of the flock?

3. In addition to integration, I believe unity, especially within a presbyterate or local church, is an important aspect of missionary work. Do you see yourself as part of the People of God in the United States or as an outsider? Have you made an honest effort to integrate into the life of the parish and the local church? Do you participate in clergy gatherings, deanery meetings, and diocesan events? Do you know the local clergy well or make a serious effort to do so? Do you see other priests and religious as your brothers and sisters?
4. In my missionary work as a priest or religious, have I continued with my formation, even if this is humbling or demanding? When I was three years old, I recall my father speaking to me about a French Bishop in Madagascar who learned the local language and could speak it, making use of idioms and so on, even better than the locals. We can ask ourselves: What degree of effort do I undertake, or have I made to learn the language, to work on accent reduction, to continue with my theological and spiritual reading? People have high standards for their clergy, and we must rise to meet their expectations, and this requires discipline and effort.
5. The United States has been greatly affected by secularization. Vietnamese culture, despite the inroads of Communism, is marked by a deep religiosity. Vietnamese people have a profound sense of awe in the presence of God. Do I convey this sense of transcendence and wonder in my celebration of the liturgy, and how do I convey it? Beyond the liturgy, how do the other aspects of my life convey the Presence of Christ to those whom I encounter?
6. How can the Vietnamese experience, which includes the pain and suffering of colonization, followed by the rise of Communist ideology, help the Church in the United States to resist current efforts at “ideological colonization”?
7. Children are considered a blessing in Vietnamese culture – true gifts from God. What is it that Vietnamese clergy can uniquely provide in helping to build a culture of life and resist the throwaway culture?

8. With its experience of immigration and being forced to flee homeland, how can the presence of Vietnamese clergy contribute to a greater spirit of hospitality, especially to new migrants who are arriving in the United States?
9. A priority for the Holy Father has been the accompaniment of married couples and families. What lessons have been learned by Vietnamese Catholics that could be useful in supporting families here in the United States, particularly in handing on the faith to young people?
10. Knowing firsthand the experience of poverty and suffering, am I close to those who experience similar phenomena here in the United States? Do I act as a Good Samaritan, showing compassion? Have I conveyed empathy so that the poor, sick, and suffering experience the closeness of God?

I know that these are not easy questions to answer, but I pose them to you, without judgment, inviting you to reflect honestly on your own vocations as missionaries and as Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American clergy, called to serve the Church in the United States. Knowing the richness of your spiritual and cultural heritage, as well as the depth of your faith and devotion, I am confident that the Church in the United States is better off with your presence and ministry.

Thank you.