

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME
ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES ANNUAL MEETING
WASHINGTON, D.C.
FEBRUARY 3, 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am grateful for the invitation of your President, Fr. Dennis Holtschneider, to help you honor the 125th anniversary of this Association. It was in this city where the President of the Catholic University of America, Fr. Thomas Conaty, worked with others to establish a consortium of schools at the end of the 19th century. Their purpose was to collaborate in the mission of Catholic higher education in this country. How does this mission relate to the mission of Christ, of which we hear in the Gospels? What is the meaning of your labor as leaders of Catholic colleges and universities?

In the first reading, Job cried out in the midst of his suffering: “Is not man’s life on earth a drudgery? Are not his days those of hirelings?” (*JOB 7:1*) What an evocative question Job asks! Perhaps you yourselves have asked this question, as you engage the difficult work of Catholic education. We all ask ourselves, from time to time: *Is it worth it? Is what I’m doing making a difference?*

Brothers and sisters, allow me, in the name of the Holy Father, to affirm that your work as Catholic educators *is worth it*. Listen to what Pope Francis said in an address to a delegation of international Catholic university leaders in Rome just two weeks ago. He said:

“I want to express my gratitude for all that Catholic universities are already doing [to make choices that reflect the Gospel]. How much commitment, innovation, wisdom, and care you bring to the triple mission of the university: teaching, research, and giving back to the community! For this, I am truly thankful.”¹

I am also thankful to you. During my seven-and-a-half years as Nuncio here, my visits to Catholic colleges and universities have been rich and blessed experiences. In these settings, we can have true dialogue through listening and discernment. We can speak about the life of the Church and the pastoral vision of the Holy Father. We can explore the ways that Catholic education can help to transmit the Gospel in the new epoch in which we are living. All of this is part of the synodal process by which we walk together with hope into the future. And this is what your work makes possible. So yes: your labor remains indispensable to the new evangelization. Let me again quote from the Pope's words to Catholic university leaders:

“I ask you to help the Church, at this moment in her history, to shed light on the deepest human aspirations by offering insight and understanding, as well as the ‘reasons of hope’ (cf. *1 Peter* 3:15) born of faith, and thus assisting the Church to engage confidently in dialogue on the great issues of our time.”²

Here, the Pope is pointing to the greatness of your mission. In the midst of the many worldly demands laid upon you, it can be hard to keep track of this mission. You have constant and increasing financial demands. There is the persistent need to promote the visibility and reputation of your institutions. And yes: you encounter opposition against some of the Gospel values that you seek to maintain. Because of these pressures, you can feel at times like Job, questioning the meaning of your labor. But in those moments of questioning and difficulty, we are able to lift our minds to the One who gives meaning to our labor: the Lord Jesus Christ.

As leaders in Catholic education, you have been entrusted with what Saint Paul refers to in today's second reading as “a stewardship” (cf. *1 COR* 9:17). This is the key to answering Job's question about the meaning of our labor. If the Christian disciple begins to ask – “Is my life a drudgery?” – a better question is: “Is my work part of the mission of the Gospel?” And when we find that the answer is “Yes”, then we have the reason for our hope and our joy. Saint Paul knew the hardship of missionary work as well as anyone. He recounted the “frequent journeys”, many

dangers, “toil and hardship”, “sleepless nights”, “hunger and thirst”; and the daily “anxiety” he felt “for all the churches”.³ But to Paul, all of this was worth it because he knew that he was doing it for the sake of Christ. “I have become all things to all,” he says, “to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the Gospel, so that I too may have a share in it” (*1 COR* 9:22-23).

In order to “remember” the greatness and the hope of our calling, we need, again and again, to return to *our encounter with Christ*. For that reason, it is good that we are here to celebrate the Eucharist. With Jesus at the center of our gathering, we rediscover the meaning of our shared mission in the world. In our common worship, our eyes are open once again to see Christ with us. He takes us by the hand, as he did the mother-in-law of Simon. He helps us up, and he refreshes us for our mission of service: walking together, and walking with Christ.

My brothers and sisters, instead of looking at this weekend’s gathering as a “business meeting”, I encourage you to see it as a spiritual reunion. A chance to return to that encounter with Christ where you first discovered your mission. This is the encounter, as Pope Benedict said, “which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”⁴ Your horizon is the same as that of Jesus: the Kingdom of God. To preach this Kingdom, as Jesus tells us in today’s Gospel, is the purpose for which he has come (cf. *MARK* 1:38). As educators, it is your purpose as well: to form students’ minds and hearts in an understanding of God’s saving love.

And so, during this precious time of annual meeting, I encourage you to allow God, present in this Eucharist, to minister to you. Take some time to receive the consoling love of Christ, who wants you to feel renewed in the mission which he shares with you. As Pope Francis has said:

“Contemplating Jesus, staying before him, adoring him in the Eucharist: it is not wasting time, but giving meaning to time.... [I]t is rediscovering the course of life in the simplicity of a silence that nourishes the heart.”⁵

Upon leaving this weekend’s meeting and returning to your work, *everyone will be looking for you*, just like they were looking for Jesus in today’s Gospel passage (cf. *MARK* 1:37). But instead of seeing that as an indication of the “drudgery” of this life, you can see it as the privilege of one who represents Jesus. By your work, you can give to others the same things that people found in Christ: the assurance of God’s love, the hope for peace and human fraternity, and the saving light of God’s truth.

¹ Pope Francis, Address to a Delegation of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, January 19, 2024.

² *Ibid.*

³ Cf. *2 Corinthians* 11:23-28.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.

⁵ Pope Francis, Angelus Address for Epiphany, January 6, 2024.