

**ADDRESS OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
PLENARY ASSEMBLY
LOUISVILLE, KY
JUNE 13, 2024**

Dear Brothers,

It is good to be with you once again. As always, please know of the spiritual closeness of the Holy Father and of his communion with you. This communion is essential. It is the communion of faith, of good will, and of true zeal for the mission of Christ.

We gather once more as shepherds of the Church in the United States, and as always, we ask ourselves: where are we? What is the context in which we are meeting? Among the foremost ecclesial activities on our minds right now is the Eucharistic Pilgrimage currently underway, which will culminate with the Eucharistic Congress in one month – not far from where we are right now.

We have set out on this Eucharistic Revival because we want our people to come to a renewed and deeper appreciation of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. We want them to know that Christ is there for them in the Eucharist: to receive their adoration, to accompany them in their earthly journey, and to feed them with the Bread of Life. We want them also to know the implications of encountering Christ in this way: how it calls them to an ongoing journey of conversion; and also how it commits them to a life of evangelization – of being people who offer an open-hearted welcome of mercy to everyone who seeks a place in God's Church. The Eucharistic processions that are going on right now, and which will converge on Indianapolis next month, are an outward symbol of what we want to happen on a spiritual level. We want people to turn to the Eucharistic Lord, to walk with him, and to be led by him. We also want this to happen in the context of *community*. Our people need to experience that a journey with the Lord is also a journey with others who seek the Lord. That this journey is a true *synod*.

Pope Francis is united with us in his desire that people re-discover the power of the Eucharist. Several times, the Pope has urged Catholics to recover the practice of adoration. In his concluding homily at the Synod of Bishops last October, he said:

“The amazement of adoration, the wonder of worship, is something essential in the life of the Church [...]. To adore God means to acknowledge in faith that he alone is Lord and that our individual lives, the Church’s pilgrim way and the ultimate outcome of history all depend on the tenderness of his love.”¹

In that same homily the Holy Father also connected our adoration of Christ with our mission of service. He said:

“To adore God and to love our brothers and sisters with his love, that is the great and perennial reform. To be a worshiping Church and a Church of service, washing the feet of wounded humanity, accompanying those who are frail, weak and cast aside, going out lovingly to encounter the poor.”²

It is good that, as shepherds, we are thinking about the needs of the flock: “How do they need to be fed?” Our people need to know and love the Lord who is walking with them in the Eucharist. But let us not forget: *We need Eucharistic revival too!* Let’s be attentive *in our own hearts* to what the Lord is saying and doing among us. As we approach the Eucharistic Congress, each of us can ask himself: “Are *we* experiencing in our own lives the Eucharistic transformation that we want our people to experience?... Are we opening ourselves to all the dimensions of the mystery of the Eucharist?” These questions, asked in a posture of humble receptivity before the Lord, can invite from God the sort of answers that will incite Eucharistic revival within *us*, and that will make us, as the Lord’s chosen shepherds, better witnesses to the Lord’s wounded and resurrected life, which he continues to live in the midst of his suffering and redeemed Church.

Since we have recently passed through the season of Easter, I think that we can see the narratives of the Lord’s resurrection appearances to his Apostles as an image for the spiritual and pastoral conversion that we need as part of our own

¹ Pope Francis, Homily at Mass for the Conclusion of the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 29 October 2023.

² *Ibid.*

Eucharistic revival. Let's look, in particular, at the appearance of Jesus to the Eleven Apostles and other disciples on the evening of Easter Sunday.³ (In fact, this picks up where we left off when I was with you in November, when I reflected with you on the story of Emmaus.) Harkening back to the famous words of Pope Benedict, this meeting with Jesus on the evening of his Resurrection was an encounter which gave to the Apostles “a new horizon and a decisive direction”.⁴ That encounter between Jesus and the Apostles is a powerful lesson for us, as shepherds of the Church. The lesson is: the Eucharistic encounter with the risen Lord affords a new personal and ecclesial experience, one in which the wounds suffered in the Body of Christ become signs of his victory over death.

+ + +

“Look at my hands and my feet,” said the Lord, “that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.”⁵ It was essential that the Apostles come to believe in a risen Christ who still existed in the flesh, a flesh that bore the marks of the wounds that caused his death. To help his disciples believe in him, he had to give them a *new* encounter with a reality that, until this point, they had been unable to grasp. To become not just disciples, but true Apostles – not just sheep, but shepherds – they had to experience what it really meant that Jesus had taken up death into life. By showing them his hands and his feet (and his side), Jesus was showing them what wounds looked like in the risen body. He was the Lamb who had been slain and was alive.⁶ He was the Victor over sin and death.⁷

By means of this experience, the Lord invited them into a mystery that would have life-changing implications for them. Because, while the Gospel account does not say it explicitly, the unspoken reality is that the Apostles were also carrying the trauma of wounds when they encountered the risen Lord. They had abandoned him out of fear. One of their own had committed suicide. They were still grieving the death of the One in whom they had believed, and they were grieving the hope that

³ See *Luke* 24:36-49.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 1 ; cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 7.

⁵ *Luke* 24:39.

⁶ See *Revelation* 5:6.

⁷ See *1 Corinthians* 15:54-57.

they thought had died with him. (How hard is the suffering for us when the thing we had been hoping for is not realized!) So yes, they had their own wounds. And so, this became a meeting between the Lord's wounds and their own. Jesus allows the disciples to touch his wounds so that their own wounds might become the place of an experience that consoles and gives discernment.

+ + +

My brothers, there is a lesson in this Resurrection encounter between Christ and the Apostles that can help us discern the presence of the risen Christ in the woundedness of the Church. We are painfully aware of the most glaring wounds in today's Church. The scandal of abuse and of failed oversight. The plague of indifference toward the poor and suffering, which can affect us all. Skepticism toward God and religion in a secularized culture. And an agitating temptation toward polarization and division, even among those of us who are committed to Christ and his Church. These wounds and sufferings are not abstract ideas to us. The bishop, because he is at the same time a disciple of Jesus, a brother to his fellow bishops, and a shepherd to his flock, feels these wounds firsthand. How can a shepherd, who himself is hurting, adequately lead and guide his suffering sheep?

We find the answer in Christ. By showing the Apostles his hands, feet, and side, the Lord is saying to them, and to us: "I choose to make your sin and failure a part of the story of my victory. If the marks of my crucifixion can exist on my resurrected body, then the marks of your own suffering and failures can exist in the body of my resurrected Church."

This is, perhaps, a different answer from the one we expect. Our inclination is that we want to "turn the page" on a troubling experience and to "move on". Move forward we must, but not in a way that erases the wound. Instead, we follow the way of Christ by acknowledging what has happened as part of the whole reality. We are a Church suffering and redeemed, fit for the glory that is our destiny, and at the same time bearing the marks of all that we have suffered, which is a constitutive element of our redemption.

+ + +

The Eucharist is that place of encounter where the whole incarnate reality of the Lord, who is ascended and risen but still with us in forms of bread and wine, invites us to bring the whole reality of our own humanity. “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,” he has told us, “you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.”⁸ We can extend these words of Jesus to their further application. “Whoever is wounded as I was, experiences precisely through those wounds the depth of my love and shares with me in my resurrection. And you share in my resurrection every time you eat and drink my risen body in the Eucharist.” Furthermore, just as the wounds of Christ heal the world of sin and death, so the wounds that we bear, as his closest collaborators in ministry, will heal those to whom we extend the good news of the Lord’s saving life.

Our response to this proposal might be like the response that some of the Jews made to Jesus when he spoke of his flesh as food. “This saying is hard!” Indeed, we are tempted to react in this way to a Savior who still appears wounded in his Resurrection. Why does he keep pointing us back to the marks of the crucifixion? He does so, because he wants to free us from the danger that comes when we forget the cross. It is a danger, both at the personal and the ecclesial levels. At the personal level, let us remember Simon Peter. After confessing Jesus as Christ, Simon immediately counseled Jesus to reject the cross and suffering.⁹ His rejection of a vulnerable Savior had everything to do with Peter’s struggles with his own vulnerability and weakness. Like Peter, we might be tempted to ask that the marks of our betrayals be removed.

This danger to our personal faith leads naturally to a danger at the level of the Church. In a Church that has been so marred by sin and failure – including that of us, her shepherds – we want desperately for those wounds to be “erased”. But what would become of a Church that, unlike Christ, does not rise from the deaths she has suffered still bearing the marks that caused her death? That would not be the true Bride of Christ! The fact is that the wounds in the Church can be made glorious if

⁸ *John* 6:53-54.

⁹ *Matthew* 16:13-23.

they are presented fully to Christ. “We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”¹⁰

There is another version of “turning the page” that can be a temptation. Rather than “turning the page forward” so that we don’t have to read the uncomfortable chapters in our story, we sometimes want to “turn the page back”. To try to resuscitate a part of the Church’s history that appeals to us because it seems like a better, simpler time. Certainly, as Pope Francis says, we must “go back to [our] roots in order to move forward”.¹¹ But these “roots” are our encounter with Christ, when we first knew we were loved and called. Remembering where we are rooted – in Christ and in his love – also implies accepting and welcoming the growth that has occurred. This is not “erasing our history” to start over again.

The healing, which we all desire, comes in a different way than “covering over” or “erasing”. Jesus can tell the disciples to touch his hands because in that touch is an experience of the power of his Resurrection. As God said through Isaiah: “See, upon the palms of my hands I have engraved you.”¹² The Lord has allowed us to write on his hands with our betrayals so that we might see on them a testament of his enduring love, a love that is stronger than death. Participation in the Eucharist brings us to experience the reality that Christ loves us precisely in our weakness and betrayals. The wounds of the Church can lead us back to the present, and back to the immanent: which is exactly where Christ wants to show us his power to heal. Christ wants to console the many wounded people whom we serve through our ministry – priests, religious, and lay faithful alike. But in order to do that, he wants first to console *us*, the shepherds of his Church.

A Eucharistic procession – the like of which has been happening in this country in an extraordinary way and which will culminate next month in Indianapolis – speaks of this. A bishop who has encountered the power of Christ’s resurrection in his own personal experience of weakness, leads his flock to that same kind of encounter with the Lord.

¹⁰ *Romans* 8:28.

¹¹ Pope Francis, Address to Members of the Board of Trustees of Loyola University Chicago, 20 May 2024.

¹² *Isaiah* 49:16.

+ + +

Two Sundays ago we celebrated the feast of the Lord's Body and Blood. This morning and tomorrow morning we are given the opportunity for Eucharistic adoration. Listen with me to the words of Pope Francis in his homily for Corpus Christi in 2020. He said that the celebration of Holy Mass is

“the Memorial that heals memory, the memory of the heart. The Mass is the treasure that should be foremost both in the Church and in our lives. And let us also rediscover Eucharistic adoration, which continues the work of the Mass within us. This will do us much good, for it heals us within. Especially now, when our need is so great.”¹³

These words of the Pope from several years ago are important for us now as well. It is also good to remember his words from *Evangelii Gaudium*, and to apply these words, not only to the lay faithful, but also to ourselves: “The Eucharist...is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”¹⁴ We are not perfect! We are weak! And by letting Christ have communion with us in our shared weakness, our shared woundedness, we will also share in his saving strength.

¹³ Pope Francis, Homily at Mass for Corpus Christi, 14 June 2020.

¹⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 47.