

**ADDRESS OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE  
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
AFRICAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC CLERGY & RELIGIOUS IN THE UNITED STATES  
23<sup>RD</sup> ANNUAL CONVENTION: *CELEBRATING OUR DIFFERENCES AND BUILDING  
BRIDGES – IN LIGHT OF THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY*  
HOUSTON, TEXAS – JUNE 27, 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is good to be with you! As representative of the Holy Father, I can assure you that Pope Francis is united with you in every effort to “build bridges”, so that we can transmit the faith and spread the joy of the Gospel. That is what you are seeking to do with this Conference, and it is what the Pope is calling us to do.

Allow me to speak with you about the gift that African clergy and religious can bring to the Church in this country, the value of diversity in the Church, and how we can all be missionaries who facilitate for others an encounter with Christ.

*The Youthfulness of the Church in Africa*

In serving the Pope’s mission in many different parts of the world, I have been enriched by the ways that the Gospel is lived in different places and cultures. In particular, through my eight years as Nuncio in Uganda, I have gained a lifelong connection with people from Africa. I see the deep devotion and lively faith of African Catholics. There is a “youthfulness” about Christianity in Africa that is invigorating. People’s exuberance for the faith is an expression of a joy that is “fresh”. When worshiping Christ with the peoples of Africa, we feel that we are celebrating a gift that has just recently been received. And as Christians, that is how our celebration *should* be, because the good news of Jesus is always new! His presence among us is a living reality that is being renewed at all times. He is always offering us new life, and a new experience of encounter. I pray that the “youthful” and exuberant faith of African Christians may continue to remind the Church that God, while he is ever ancient, is always new.<sup>1</sup> This is one of the gifts that you bring to the Church here in the United States.

---

<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book X, Chapter 27.

## *The Value of Diversity*

Diversity is essential in the Church. By our different cultures, languages, and ethnicities, we enrich one another and manifest to each other the many attributes of God and of the Catholic faith. Pope Francis has likened ecclesial diversity to a symphony. He said:

“Diversity is necessary; it is indispensable. However, each sound must contribute to the common design. This is why mutual listening is essential: each musician must listen to the others. If one listens only to himself, however sublime his sound may be, it will not benefit the symphony; and the same would be the case if one section of the orchestra did not listen to the others, but played as if it were alone, as if it were the whole. [...] Dear brothers and sisters, it does us good to reflect upon ourselves as the image of the orchestra, in order to learn to be an ever more symphonic and synodal Church.”<sup>2</sup>

As Africans living and serving in the United States, you contribute to the evangelization of this country in a special way. By the particular experience of faith and culture that you bring from Africa, you remind the people of the United States that faith is an always-new encounter with Jesus Christ which brings joy to our lives.

## *Missionaries with an Open Heart*

By living in this country, you actually learn what it means to be missionaries *ad gentes* – “to the nations”. What the first missionaries did when they brought the Gospel to your native countries in Africa, you now do here. Through your priestly and religious apostolates, you evangelize. Sometimes you are meeting people who are hearing of Christ for the first time. Often, you are doing the “new evangelization”: that is, presenting Christ’s message to people who have heard of it, but for whom the Gospel has been more or less “washed away” by the tide of a postmodern and secularizing culture. But no matter the context of our evangelization in this country, what we announce is not ourselves but Christ. It is a very *personal* proclamation, because it is based on our own encounter with the Lord. But it is not ourselves whom we preach, as St. Paul says, “but Jesus Christ as Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Homily at Ordinary Public Consistory for New Cardinals, 30 September 2023.

<sup>3</sup> 2 *Corinthians* 4:5.

There is one temptation that I would like to point out, which is common when we are missionaries to a different country or culture. The temptation is that, when we encounter the new culture, we want to criticize that culture for the ways that it differs from our own. To be sure: no country, no place, is the perfect “ideal” of God’s kingdom on earth. And we are appropriately grateful for the aspects of our native culture that have been fertile ground for our own faith. The temptation is that we can focus on what a particular culture lacks, and we judge it. For instance, if you are steeped in the African customs that involve vibrant singing and joyous dancing as integral parts of worship – and thank God for these expressions of faith! – you might ask, when confronted by quiet and subdued liturgies: “Where is the Spirit?” And yet, some of that contrast in style of worship represents, not necessarily a lack of faith, but a different form of expression.

### *Facilitating the Encounter with Christ*

As missionaries, our mandate is not to preach ourselves. This is not to say that the particular story of our own encounter with Christ is not important. Certainly it is! Saint Paul made the story of his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus the foundation of his preaching of the Gospel. We are inspired every time we hear a person’s conversion story. But it isn’t the particular way that we encountered Christ that we are trying to transmit. Nor do we seek to impose on others the singular way that we continue to find God in our daily walk. What we transmit is the *person* whom we have discovered, and the fact that he has called me to become one with *him*. In telling our own story when we evangelize, we are letting the other person know, in a concrete way, that we have found Christ; and more importantly, that *he has found me*. This becomes the vehicle for letting the other person know: “He is ready to find *you* also. And he can find you in the place where you are, right now. He is ready to speak to you, in a language and in a manner that *you* can understand.”

This is what a true missionary does. He finds Christ in the people to whom he has been sent, and helps them to connect with Christ. In this way, the experience of evangelization becomes *mutually* enriching. The person who is being evangelized is enriched by coming to know Christ – either for the first time, or in a deeper and more transformative way. The person who evangelizes is enriched by seeing how Christ meets another person in a unique way. Thus the faith of the missionary

becomes more expansive, more encompassing of the whole human situation. The missionary is reminded, when he sees a person encounter Christ in a way that is different from the way that he himself met the Lord, that salvation is the initiative of God, and not of himself. He sees that God's mercy is truly universal. He sees that the work of salvation is completely personal, but not limited by one's own experience. Christ is the Savior. And together we rejoice in our saving encounter with him, which retains all of its diversity from one person to another, from one culture to another.

So, I encourage you to remember your own "personal Galilee", as the Holy Father likes to say. That event in your life when you discovered that the Lord was looking at you, and calling you to follow him. Let the remembrance of that first encounter with Christ continue to give you joy and hope in your work of being the Lord's missionaries. And keep looking for the ways in which Christ encounters those you serve, here in this country, and in your own particular fields of mission.

In conclusion, allow me to leave you with the words that Pope Francis spoke to the priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, and seminarians at his visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo last year. He said:

"Through you, the Lord also wants to anoint his people today with the balm of consolation and hope. You are called to...remind others that he made us and we belong to him, and to encourage and accompany the community's journey in faith towards the One who always walks at our side.... That is what it means to be *servants of the people*: to be priests, sisters and missionaries who have known the joy of a liberating encounter with Jesus and now offer it to others."<sup>4</sup>

Dear Brothers and Sisters, God bless you. You have my prayers, and the blessing of the Pope. May God continue to inspire and strengthen you as missionaries for Christ.

---

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis; Address to Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Persons, and Seminarians; Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2 February 2023.