

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
REGION II ENCUESTRO – NEW YORK STATE – ALBANY, NEW YORK
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As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to the United States of America, I want to express the warm greetings, spiritual closeness and paternal affection of Pope Francis to all gathered here for this Regional Encuentro in preparation for the Fifth National Encuentro that will take place in September in Texas. The gathering this weekend is an important milestone, marking a pivotal stage, in the life of the Church in the State of New York.

This event, as well as the forthcoming gathering in Texas, will provide an opportunity to encounter the Lord and one another; to listen to one another and to identify gifts and talents that may be of service in the mission of evangelization; and to offer an opportunity to hear the voices of those at the margins and of different cultures and peoples so that the Church might be enriched and show forth the beauty of the Lord, deepening our communion. Allow me to express my gratitude to Wanda Vasquez, Chairperson of Region II for the Encuentro, and Father Brian McWeeney, the Bishop's representative for the Encuentro. It is an honor to be here with you.

In preparation for the Fifth Encuentro, nearly two years ago, Pope Francis said to the American bishops:

Our great challenge is to create a culture of encounter, which encourages individuals and groups to share the richness of our traditions and experiences, to break down walls and to build bridges. The Church in America, as elsewhere, is called to 'go out' from its comfort zone and to be a leaven of communion. Communion among ourselves, with our fellow Christians, and with all who seek a future of hope. We need to become ever more fully a community of missionary disciples, filled with love of the Lord Jesus and enthusiasm for the spread of the Gospel." (Video message to the General Assembly of the USCCB, 14-17 November 2016)

The Encuentro has the potential to be a new Pentecost for the Church in the United States – an event in which diverse people hear the Gospel and receive its joy, undoing the confusion and misunderstanding of Babel and replacing it with a culture of encounter. We speak of a *culture of encounter* and use this word *encuentro* or *encounter*, but what does it really mean? I think we can speak of an encounter with God, an encounter with one another, and an encounter with the world.

The Encounter – Communion with God

At the beginning of his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict said:

"Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." (Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 1)

First, we speak of an encounter with God. It is not simply that we meet God, but it is something more: we are encountered by God. Our God looks for us. Upon finding us, He calls us – each by name, no matter how different we are, no matter our degree of faith or practice. He wants to meet us. This encounter is not a chance encounter or something routine, but it is a life-changing event. It is like the encounter with Jesus and the disciples of John, Andrew and John, in Saint John's Gospel. John the Baptist pointed Jesus out as the Lamb of God. John's own

disciples followed Jesus, asked questions, and spent time with Him. They verified what John had said – they verified that the Presence was among them, that He was the One who would take away the sins of the world. Andrew came back from the encounter and told his brother Simon, “We have found the Messiah.” It was a life-changing event that led them to become disciples and eventually missionaries.

The idea of encounter implies an openness to being encountered by the Lord, an openness to the Mystery of God. It is the opposite of a purely formal faith or religious practice. This openness demands vulnerability on our part – to be moved from our patterns and ways of doing things to respond to the call of the Lord and His mission in these challenging times.

The Bishops of Latin America recognized the challenge of transmitting the faith some years ago at Aparecida, and what they said is just as pertinent for the Church in the United States today:

“Our cultural traditions are no longer handed on from one generation to the next with the same ease as in the past. This even affects that deepest core of each culture, constituted by religious experience, which is now likewise difficult to hand on through education and the beauty of cultural expressions. It even reaches into the family itself, which, as a place of dialogue and intergenerational solidarity, had been one of the most important vehicles for handing on the faith.” (V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, *Documento conclusivo*, CELAM, Aparecida 2007, n. 37.)

If we want to meet the challenges of evangelization today, then we must first be willing to encounter the Lord – to be moved by the Spirit of God. In his first Pentecost homily, Pope Francis said:

“...the soul is a kind of sailboat, the Holy Spirit is the wind which fills its sails and drives it forward, and the gusts of wind are the gifts of the Spirit. Lacking his impulse and grace, we do not go forward. The Holy Spirit draws us into the mystery of the living God and saves us from the threat of a Church which is gnostic and self-referential, closed in on herself. He impels us to open the doors and go forth to proclaim and bear witness to the good news of the Gospel, to communicate the joy of faith, the encounter with Christ.” (Pope Francis, Homily for the Solemnity of Pentecost, 19 May 2013)

The Holy Spirit is the soul of mission. The first work of the Spirit is conversion – of persons and structures, especially after meeting the person of Christ, who gives us a renewed sense of our own humanity and of seeing the world. The encounter opens our eyes to the wonder and awe of God. The Spirit draws us into a deeper relationship with Christ, so that we can mediate the Presence of the One, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Thus, we can understand the encounter as the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing us closer to Jesus, who changes our lives. Encounter involves openness to Mystery and to relationships – relationships which are grace-filled. The encounter is an expression of communion with God.

The Encounter - Communion with Each Other in the Church

The encounter with each other in the Church should imitate the grace-filled encounter we have with God. We realize that while we are all made in God’s image and likeness, we are different – in language, culture, appearance, and temperament. The *Encuentro* affords us the opportunity to appreciate our diversity. This diversity is also the work of the Spirit, who desires unity without requiring uniformity. It is the Spirit of God who brings harmony out of chaos – even in the Church!

The Spirit preserves unity in diversity. It is the Spirit of God who has brought you to this place at this time to do his work.

What is the Spirit saying? To answer this question, we must listen to God in prayer, *and* we must listen to each other, for the Spirit is at work in the flesh of each person gathered here. Each person, in the Spirit, can contribute something to mediating the presence of Christ and making His love and mercy known in the Church. What is the Spirit saying through 40% of the Church in this country that identifies as Hispanic or Latino or through young Catholics are Hispanic or Latino? When young people tell us that they worry that their peers are not practicing or that they themselves would like to be involved, can we hear the Spirit at work in them? The process of the Encuentro has been, is, and, God-willing, will be a moment of grace for the Church here in New York, provided that we are open to the Spirit and to each other.

There could be a temptation to acknowledge differences and then to isolate ourselves from the rest of the Church, hoarding our gifts and talents. To do so would be fatal. It would be the opposite of what the Holy Father sees as the purpose of the encounter, which is “to share the richness of our traditions and experiences, to break down walls and to build bridges.” This is another way of saying, that the encuentro or encounter is for building and deepening communion.

Fortunately, the preparation and process of the Encuentro at your parishes and diocesan gatherings has moved toward integration, identifying the contribution that Latino Catholics can make to the Church, recognizing the vital role Latinos play in the New Evangelization. The local and regional gatherings have provided an opportunity to listen to people – men and women of all ages – at the grassroots to hear their concerns, their hopes and dreams.

The process has opened our ears to voices of those at the peripheries, voices that we may not have otherwise heard. It allowed people from different countries and cultures to express themselves – not only their concerns but also their faith – in their own words. While these efforts are leading to the national gathering, they are *the beginning* of a new phase in the transformation and renewal of the Church in the United States. I want to emphasize the word *beginning*. The Spirit is starting something new here. This is not newness for the sake of novelty; rather, the newness that God brings offers fulfillment, joy and peace.

This is particularly true for those at the margins – the peripheries of society, including many of our Hispanic brothers and sisters, as well as the poor. The Holy Father speaks of building a *culture of encounter*. The word “culture” refers to something that has penetrated the heart of a people. When something becomes culture, we could say that it has become a “shared passion” among the people and a lifestyle that characterizes the group. We as a people, through the Encuentro, are discovering that we are passionate about building bridges in our communities and parishes, within the Church in the United States, and in our families. We are passionate about including more people and their gifts, rather than excluding them, as if they simply do not matter or as if they could be discarded. We are passionate about making more disciples.

We are passionate about many things of faith, but we do not have to show our passion in the exact same way. In his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope speaks of “A People of many Faces” (cf. *EG*, 115-118), providing a vision of the People of God that is incarnated among diverse peoples and cultures. While Saint Thomas Aquinas says that grace builds upon nature and perfects it, Pope Francis adds that “grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it.” (*EG*, 115)

Men and women do not exist in a vacuum, adrift from relationships; rather, they are inserted into a determined people and share a common lifestyle. The baptized are inserted into

and transfigure their cultures, forming the one People of God and revealing the many faces of God. The evangelizing Church is the evangelized Church, which the Holy Spirit beautifies by showing forth new dimensions of revelation – a new face.

We can ask ourselves some questions: How does my encounter with another person enrich me? How does their encounter with me enrich them? In encountering another, we discover that while we share many things in common, there are also differences. What can these differences offer to the Church in her mission of evangelization? One particular culture or style of devotion may be quite successful in transmitting the faith from generation to generation. How will we preserve what works for future generations? Can we learn from one another?

For example, the Holy Father points out that some members of the flock often preserve and transmit the faith through their popular spirituality and devotion, enriching the whole Church. I think of my own experiences in Mexico, Cuba, and Haiti, and I know this to be true. The devotional life, processions, music and art can convey the mysteries of the faith and attract others through beauty to the Transcendent. In this way, they live as disciples in a permanent state of mission. They serve as a living reminder to the rest of the Church of the need to offer an *attractive* proposal of faith – to show forth the attractiveness of the person of Christ.

The Encounter with the World – Deepening Communion with Humanity

A united Church, rich in diversity, is a Church that goes forth to the world in mission. Jesus, whom we have encountered personally, has touched our lives in diverse ways. Jesus has ascended to the right hand of His Father, and we, the Church, make known His Presence in the world, hoping to awaken in our brothers and sisters, even those who do not yet believe, a sense of Mystery and a renewed sense of their own humanity.

There are many people who live in the world without a sense of their dignity as persons. They are excluded and left to be discarded – from the unborn to the poor to the migrant to the elderly or ill person. The missionary Church goes forth to them. Pope Francis has said:

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. ... If something should rightly disturb us, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 49)

In going to the world, the Church offers humanity the possibility of having not only some material needs met, by providing food, clothing, and shelter, but of having their spiritual needs met through a loving relationship with Christ. To speak to another person about Jesus, we first need to meet them and to listen to them. Encountering the other has the potential to bring voices from the peripheries to the center in a meaningful way. The voices of those at the peripheries among the Hispanic/Latino population are important for another reason: they are voices that can announce the Gospel as part of the new evangelization. They make Christ known there; they bring hope!

By listening to their voices and the voices of others at the margins, the Church affirms the dignity of the human person. In a sense, encountering one another is about relationships and being in right relationship with another, which is a form of justice. When the Church and the Latino face of the Church cries out for justice – for families, for migrants, for better wages, for the right simply to be heard and respected – and when we listen to those voices, we, as a Church, give

witness to the value of each life and person. Dignity is not contingent on what a person *does* or what a person has, or one's immigration or work status; rather, dignity is inherent to the person, based on who he or she *is*. In listening to the voices from the peripheries, the encounter reminds each person of his or her worth: each person is of infinite value. The process of the *Encuentro* is one way of reminding each person that he or she has something to offer. The prophetic voice of the Church is heard in her defense of the dignity of the human person.

Conclusion

In attending various regional Encuentros, I have listened and heard the cry of the people – of Hispanics – for a Church to be more welcoming, more grateful for their many gifts, and even more supportive of them in their situations of fear and hopelessness. It is a cry of those hungering for a deeper relationship with God and the Virgin, to whom they desire to be close.

While there are those cries, I also saw the face of a young Church, filled with members who know that God is calling them to give the best of themselves to the Church and to their neighbor. I see it here before my eyes. I believe firmly that the Spirit of God can raise up many new missionary disciples and through the Encuentro help them to realize their own potential to be leaders in the Church with all the enthusiasm of Andrew who said to his brother, "We have found the Messiah!"

The Encuentro process has helped identify both pastoral priorities and leaders within the Hispanic community for our parishes and churches. These leaders must now be supported and sustained so that they may continue to bring the voices of those at the margins to their priests and bishops and to society at large. We know that this regional Encuentro and the national Encuentro are not just for Hispanics but are events for the whole Church in all the dioceses in New York and for the national Church. They are opportunities to discover how our shared passion for faith in Christ Jesus might be manifested in our communities, parishes, schools, workplaces, and families. They are the beginning of something new. Where it will lead, we do not know, but God often surprises us.

I conclude with a question: Do we have the courage to boldly follow, as missionary disciples, along the new paths that the God of surprises sets before us, confident in the power of Christ Jesus and the Spirit who renews all things?