

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
“PASTORAL CONVERSION AND THE TRANSMISSION OF FAITH”
RESOURCE CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the personal representative of the Holy Father to the United States, I want to express His Holiness’ paternal affection and spiritual closeness and to express his gratitude for your particular vocations as you gather for these days to discuss the theme, “Pastoral Conversion: Structures in the Service of Mission.” I want to thank Sister Sharon Euart, the Executive Director of RCRI, for her kind invitation to be with you. This evening I want to speak about pastoral conversion and the transmission of faith.

Pastoral Conversion and the Renewal of Religious Life

This theme of pastoral conversion is very close to the heart of Pope Francis. Certainly, he emphasizes it in his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. The idea of pastoral conversion was a prominent theme throughout his time as Archbishop of Buenos Aires and particularly at the time when the bishops of Latin America were gathered at Aparecida.

In a speech to the Fifth National Ecclesial Convention of the Italian Church, he said, “Today we are not living in an epoch of change so much as an epochal change.”¹ The missionary mandate of the Church – to form new disciples and to evangelize – does not happen in a vacuum. Today’s ever-changing cultural context requires a new approach.

Prior to my appointment as nuncio in the United States, I had been posted in Mexico, arriving just at the time of the Aparecida Conference. The Latin American bishops had to confront this question of epochal change as they saw Catholics fall away from the Church or join sects. They noticed that in history there were certain principles or values which organized the life of persons, societies, and institutions. These were different for each era – the pre-Columbian period, the colonial period, the period of independence, and the modern period. At some point, some of the ‘unquestioned’ values of each epoch were challenged and replaced by other values. The modern period, marked by globalization and societal fragmentation, made evangelization difficult.

Similar changes in values could be found in European and American history. More recently, 1968 would serve as a watershed moment in the West. The modern period has been impacted by globalization, emerging new technologies and means of communication, the great movement or displacement of persons, and a loss of a Christian anthropology, resulting in a lack of identification with the Church and a sense of belonging. Today, this is what alienates people, who suffer from loneliness and insecurity.

¹ Pope Francis, “Address at the Meeting with participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church,” Firenze, 10 November 2015.

At Aparecida, the Latin American bishops perceived this insecurity and its effects on evangelization – the transmission of the faith from one person to another, from one generation to another. They stated bluntly:

“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.”²

As you know, the “author” of the Aparecida document was really the future-Pope Francis. To address the changes and insecurity effectively, the bishops adopted a method. What was the method? Listening to reality. Attention to reality reveals that in history, one thing that has been constant is change, which affects the conditions for the transmission of the faith. What are the real conditions of our people?

Pope Francis’ pastoral experience bore fruit at Aparecida, when collectively the bishops asked: Can we transmit the faith in the specific context of Latin America in a way that offers to the people the possibility of an encounter with Christ?

The bishops did not provide an immediate answer; rather, they listened and dialogued with married couples, families, young people, professionals and experts. Then, they analyzed carefully the conditions of the world today, examining those things that were an obstacle for people to pursue their deepest aspirations and that prevented them from asking true questions and receiving true answers in the political, social, economic and religious realms.

As pastors, they were forced to recognize their responsibility to educate young people to reality, so that they could become aware of their own humanity. In doing so, they would rediscover their aspiration to truth, justice, goodness, happiness, and beauty – the fundamental human experiences constitutive of the human heart. They knew this would come about only through an encounter with Christ, who calls each person to follow Him – to be a disciple. A disciple whose life has been touched by the Lord cannot help but share what Christ has done for him, and so this disciple is transformed into a missionary who witnesses to Christ in the world. Thus, we speak of missionary disciples.

This was true not only for the faithful but even for the bishops themselves. They would have to evangelize in a changed context. What was true for the bishops and the lay faithful in that context is also true for religious men and women who labor in the vineyard of the Lord during this change of epoch in this country. We too are called to evangelize in a changed context, and this may require us to change our structures, attitudes, and ways of doing things. Change is difficult!

Perhaps, as religious you have been experiencing constant change since the Second Vatican Council and its decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, which encouraged religious to be guided by “both a constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed

² V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, *Documento conclusivo*, CELAM, Aparecida 2007, n. 39.

Men and women religious, of course, must rediscover their identity, finding their place, mediating between the institutional church and the reality of the lived-experience of the People of God in their concrete situations. Further, to the extent that some religious are clerics, religious communities must negotiate at times between clerical identity and their particular charism. Moreover, while remaining loyal sons and daughters of the Church, they are called to speak with a prophetic voice. Finally, even at the time of Vatican II and even more so today, the face of the Church is changing; that is, the Church is moving from a Euro-centric Church to a truly global Church, a “Church with many faces”.

These tensions existed in the post-Conciliar era when religious communities were trying to renew themselves and rediscover their charisms. Simultaneously, there was great social upheaval, and the hoped-for renewal was anything but smooth. Many communities watched their vocations plummet and members leave their communities for a type of social activism, which was well-meaning but which did not always place Christ at the center. Change was and is difficult!

Pope Francis has been trying over these five years to revitalize the impulse for renewal in the Church called for by the Second Vatican Council. This renewal is not motivated by ideology, nor is it motivated by maintenance or preservation of structures; rather, the renewal he envisions must be motivated by mission. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, repeating the words of Pope John Paul II, he says, “All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion.”³

This holds true for religious life as well. The call to pastoral conversion necessarily involves mission, evangelization, and the transmission of the faith from one generation to the next.

Pastoral Conversion and Mission

Pope Francis has a dream for Christ’s Church – that it would be a missionary Church. He 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.”⁴

Pope Francis dreams of a poor Church for the poor, a Church that is 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 out of its comfort zone (cf. *EG*, 20) - a Church willing to put out into the deep for a great catch!

To evangelize, the Church must constantly refer herself back to God, who has manifested Himself in Christ and who through the Holy Spirit continues to dwell in and animate the Church. An evangelizing Church must act in accordance with the will of God and make known the presence of God. Therefore, the Pope does not want a self-referential Church, but rather a Church which goes forth to bring the “joy of the Gospel” to the whole world. Pope Francis explains his preference:

³ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium (EG)*, 24 November 2013, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

“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. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the center and which then ends up by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. 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.”⁵

This friendship with Christ is the fruit of an encounter with Him. It is the Church’s mission to facilitate this encounter, which can be life-changing as it was, for example, for that great missionary Saint Paul. Thus, while new programs might be helpful for evangelization, the encounter is essential. Pope Benedict XVI expressed it this way:

“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.”⁶

This event or Person is Jesus Himself. The proclamation of the Lord’s Resurrection cannot be understood as a mere recollection of a past event; rather, He continues to live. The Church exists to help others to encounter the Risen One who offers salvation. This is the mission!

I want to say a word to the consecrated women who are here. At the Easter Vigil last year, Pope Francis noted the presence of women, who unlike the disciples “did not run away, who remained steadfast, who faced life as it is and who knew the bitter taste of injustice. We see them there, before the tomb, filled with grief but equally incapable of accepting that things must always be this way.”⁷

As consecrated women, you are witnesses to the power of the Risen Lord, which manifests itself in love and which opens new horizons that lead to peace and joy. The Holy Father continued: “The beating heart of the Risen Lord is given to us, and we are asked to give it in turn as a transforming force, as the leaven of a new humanity.”

Just as Mary Magdalene gave prophetic witness to the Risen Lord, your witness is also prophetic. Recall the words of the Holy Father as he concluded the Year for Consecrated Life: “Consecrated persons are called to be a concrete and prophetic sign of God’s closeness, of this sharing in a condition of fragility, of sin and of the wounds of man in our time.”⁸

Returning to the idea of mission, which applies to all of us, as missionary disciples, we must be people who go forth. Pope Francis says:

“...the position of missionary disciples is not in the center but at the periphery: they live poised towards the peripheries... including the peripheries of eternity, in the encounter with Jesus. In the preaching of the Gospel, to speak of ‘existential peripheries’ decentralizes things; as a rule, we are afraid to leave the center. The

⁵ Ibid., 49

⁶ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 1.

⁷ Francis, Homily at the Easter Vigil, 15 April 2017.

⁸ Francis, Homily for the Conclusion of the Year for Consecrated Life, 2 February 2016.

missionary disciple is someone 'off center': the center is Jesus Christ, who calls us and sends us forth."⁹

The unique position of religious – at the peripheries – ministering among the poor and lonely, positioned between the institutional and charismatic dimensions of the Church, affords an opportunity to carry out the mission of evangelization in this epoch of change, motivated not by ideology but by mission.

Pastoral Conversion and the Holy Spirit

But what will enable us to carry out this mission? Pope Francis says that "What makes obsolete structures pass away, what leads to a change of heart in Christians, is precisely *missionary spirit*."¹⁰ Pastoral conversion is a work of the Holy Spirit.

The first work of the Spirit of God is conversion. The Aparecida document and *Evangelii Gaudium* (cf. EG 25) refer to pastoral conversion, which involves believing in the Good News, believing in Christ as the one who announces the Kingdom and the triumph over evil, believing in the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with joy, and believing in the Church, who makes Christ incarnate in culture and among the peoples. Pastoral conversion takes place in the recognition that people's religious experiences, including those of migrants, the poor, and those at the spiritual and existential peripheries, are an authentic place of encounter with God. Pastoral conversion means moving from mere conservation to a decidedly pastoral ministry. Pastoral and missionary conversion go hand in hand – conversion of attitudes and structures.

Pastoral conversion begins with personal conversion. The Aparecida document states:

"Personal conversion engenders the ability to make everything subject to establishing the Kingdom of life. We bishops, priests, permanent deacons, religious men and women, lay men and women are called to assume an attitude of ongoing pastoral conversion, which entails listening and discerning 'what the Spirit says to the churches' (Rev 2:29) through the signs of the times in which God is made manifest."¹¹

The mission of transmitting the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a task requiring holy patience, because we are aware that the Spirit of God always "precedes" us. The Spirit is the true protagonist in evangelization. The Spirit goes ahead of us in the hearts of individuals and in the culture of peoples.

To be a missionary is not just for some individuals in the Church who go off to a foreign land; rather, it is the task of the whole community to be missionary – to be an evangelizing community. All, anointed by the Spirit and sharing the dignity of the children of God, are responsible for transmitting the faith.

The Church by her nature is missionary. There is an indissoluble connection between discipleship and evangelization. The Church is called to announce the Gospel of Mercy from which she lives and is constantly evangelized herself. The Holy Father says:

⁹ Francis, "Address to the leadership of CELAM," 28 July 2013.

¹⁰ EG, 25.

¹¹ V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, *Documento conclusivo*, CELAM, Aparecida 2007, 366.

Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are "disciples" or "missionaries", but rather, we are "missionary disciples".¹²

Pastoral Conversion, Shared Responsibility, and Closeness to the People

Pope Francis' insistence on a "pastoral conversion" derives naturally from love for the people and the shared missionary responsibility of all God's people, including religious communities. Each religious community (and community of believers) must ask: "What is our role in the People of God?"

The idea of pastoral conversion and shared responsibility was already present at Aparecida, which states:

"To evangelize souls, we must develop a spiritual joy from being close to the life of the people, even to the point of discovering that this is the source of a superior joy. Mission is a passion for Jesus, but at the same time a passion for his people."¹³

Jesus' life was based on many encounters. Therefore, "captivated by this model, we want to integrate ourselves more deeply into society, to share the life of all, to listen to their concerns, to collaborate materially and spiritually with them in their needs, to rejoice with those who are happy, and to weep with those who weep. So we commit ourselves to creating a new world, working side by side with everyone"¹⁴.

We must not allow ourselves to be enclosed by bureaucratic or functional procedures, locked in patterns of dull routine and self-referentiality, which only make us sick. Being close to the people demands pastoral conversion, even conversion of structures, freeing us to be close to them. A sure remedy for our ecclesia sickness is closeness to the people, with whom Christ walks and who, while the subject of our apostolic works, also remain protagonists in evangelization, bringing the joy of Christ to us. Closeness to the people, without worldliness, inoculates us against the illness of being self-referential.

As consecrated persons, we must be merciful, supportive, and missionary amid the people. For this reason, religious men and women are vital. They live and minister among the people – in the socio-cultural and historical context in which the People of God live. These contexts are being transformed during this period of epochal change and represent new challenges to the Church in building the Kingdom. Therefore, pastoral conversion demands not only openness to the Holy Spirit, but also fidelity to the Holy Spirit for authentic spiritual, pastor and institutional reforms. Without fidelity, we risk creating structures that undermine the mission of the Gospel and that do not serve our people well.

We can never forget what fidelity to the life of the evangelical counsels means to the people. In many cultures, people are looking for signs. Religious consecration is for the people

¹² *EG*, 120

¹³ V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, *Documento conclusivo*, CELAM, Aparecida 2007, n. 268.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 269.

a sign of hope – an eschatological sign – that in the midst of the sufferings of this world points to eternity and happiness with God. Being close to the people means being a missionary of hope.

Pastoral conversion involves the conversion of pastors, the shepherds of the flock. Here I refer not only to the bishops, but also to those religious who are also priests. We need to be converted not only for our sake but for the sake of the flock. In his letter to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, the Holy Father said: “The pastor is the shepherd of a people, so that the people are served from within (...). Gazing upon the Holy People of God, and feeling like an integral part of it, shows us our place in life”¹⁵, and saves us from abstractions, from mere theoretical speculations, and from enclosed, functionalist ecclesiastical structures.

Pastoral conversion requires shepherds to love the people entrusted to them, to live in their midst with the closeness proper to “faith-filled wanderers”, to embrace them with a merciful tenderness that excludes no one – because God’s love excludes no one – in solidarity with their sufferings and hopes, especially those of the weakest, the sick, the poor, and the excluded. What is said of the shepherds could be said of the religious as well!

Indeed, the Aparecida document indicates that the “conversion of the shepherds also leads us to live and promote a spirituality of communion and participation, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up. Pastoral conversion requires that ecclesial communities be communities of missionary disciples around Jesus Christ, Master and Shepherd.”¹⁶

Closeness to the people is a requirement of pastoral conversion. That is why Pope Francis condemns the “spiritual worldliness” of those who become “princes” and look down contemptuously on their people from afar, who at times are obsessed with privileges and recognitions, and at other times are reduced to administrators of a religious organization. Thus, religious communities must ask themselves not only which type of community they wish to be (that is, an entitled one or a missionary one?), but also which type of community Christ is calling them to be.

Conclusion: Pastoral Conversion and the Transmission of Faith

Pastoral conversion means transmitting the faith in a language that people can understand and transmitting in a personal way – one on one. This change in style also means being with the poor, ministering to them and learning from them (cf. *EG*, 198-200), gradually being transformed into a Church of the poor. While financial resources are important, when the faithful repeatedly hear calls for money, without a corresponding announcement of the joyful Gospel message and a genuine concern for the salvation of souls, they quickly become disheartened. The change in style demands confronting, with the truth of the Gospel, the dictatorship of relativism, at both a theoretical and practical level, which often manifests itself in the exclusion of vast swaths of society and in the throwaway culture. The People of God want a Church that will defend them and speak for them, but with integrity. The proof of the change in

¹⁵ Letter of Pope Francis to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, 19 March 2016.

¹⁶ V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, *Documento conclusivo*, CELAM, Aparecida 2007, 368.

style will come in the consistency and integrity of Christian witness, that is, in truly being a holy, faithful People of God.

One thing is certain, Christ never said, “Do not go out!” He does not want us to wait in churches, convents and monasteries for the faithful to enter. Pastoral conversion requires a missionary conversion towards all ambits of the common life and to all existential and social peripheries, and to all man-made structures. The transmission of the faith which is the work of evangelization requires pastoral conversion at all levels of ecclesial life. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes:

The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and, in this way, elicit a positive response from those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself.¹⁷

Pope Francis’ pontificate has a missionary heart at its core, especially towards those who are distant from the Church. We must go out to look for the many lost sheep, rather than tending the few that remain within the enclosure. We must not remain hemmed in, waiting within an ecclesial walled-garden. We need to be centered in Christ and well-rooted in his Body, which is the Church, but eager for the mission, moving from maintenance and self-preservation to mission.

This is not without risk and doubt. How can we go out into the storm? How can our members carry on? There can be an overwhelming fatalism: Our members are aging. We are not as many as we used to be. Let’s find a way to provide for our healthcare and to have a “happy death.” It is precisely these attitudes that need to be converted by an awareness that Christ is with us. He promised that He would be – even until the end of the ages!

It is a question of fearlessly going out to meet others, without in any way jeopardizing our own belonging. The mission is nothing other than communicating the gift of the encounter with Christ, who has changed our lives and continues to change our lives, even in an epoch of change.

¹⁷ EG, 27.