



**Ambassadors of Faith, Heralds of Hope, and Messengers of Love:
What the Church and the Nation Expect from
You as Latino Leaders**

Address to the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders
(C.A.L.L.)

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The Most Rev. José H. Gomez, S.T.D.
Archbishop of San Antonio

My dear friends, my brothers and sisters: What a joy it is to be with you!

We meet here again in San Malo at the end of another summer. And we see that what was once just a dream has begun to come to life. C.A.L.L. is now almost one year old. The year has passed quickly, hasn't it? Now we face all the questions of growing up: Where do we go from here? What should we be doing? Most importantly: What is expected of us—by God? By our Church? By our countrymen? These are the things we need to talk about today.

To start our discussion, to put it into perspective, I want to recall one of our great forefathers in the faith. Some of you know that I have a special devotion to the Venerable Antonio Margil, a Franciscan missionary who was known as the “Apostle of Mexico” and the “Apostle of Texas.” In fact, it has been said that only Our Lady of Guadalupe and St. Juan Diego did more to spread the Gospel in the New World than Father Antonio Margil.

Father Antonio was ordained in Spain at the age of 24. He left his home forever in 1683. Never to see his family again. Why did he do it? For the love of Jesus Christ and the desire to spread the good news of his Gospel. When he set sail for the New World, he told his mother that there were “millions of souls [there] lost for want of priests to dispel the darkness of unbelief.”

For the next 43 years, Father Antonio covered thousands of miles of uncharted territory. He walked barefoot and took with him only a walking stick, his prayer book, and a small kit for saying Mass. He would travel forty



or fifty miles a day this way. He covered so much ground in a day they called him “the Flying Father.”

He established churches in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Louisiana, and Texas. He founded the beautiful mission of San José in San Antonio in 1720. Through his ministry, tens of thousands of people came to the life-transforming encounter with Jesus Christ.

It was scary work, being a missionary in the New World. So many times he just barely escaped death. Near the Guazamota River in Mexico, his missionary party was confronted by Nayarits tribesman with machetes. One time he was almost burned at the stake. Another time he was lashed to a tree and faced a squad of a dozen dead-eyed men with bows and arrows.

Yet Father Antonio Margil’s experiences are not all that unique. The missionary history of the Americas is filled with these kind of dramatic, heroic stories. I think of St. Issac Jogues and St. John de Brébeauf; St. Juan Macias and St. Roque González. Or the Franciscan missionary priests martyred in what is now Georgia in 1597.

My point is this: The seeds of the Gospel were sown in the New World with the blood of many martyrs and the anonymous sweat and sacrifice of countless other men and women. We are the fruits of those seeds. You and I. By their blood, sweat, and sacrifice, we have come to know Jesus. We can never forget this, my friends.

None of us is Catholic by chance. None of us knows the love of Christ because we thought it up by ourselves. We are able to know Jesus because of the witness of all those who went before us marked with the sign of faith. A great cloud of witnesses that extends back through the missionaries, all the way back to the apostles. This is the beauty of the communion of saints, the great extended family of the Church that stretches from earth to heaven, from the beginning of time to the end of history.

That great cloud of witnesses includes saints and missionaries like Father Antonio Margil. But it also includes your families—your mothers and fathers, your grandparents, godparents, and relatives. Out of love for you, they sacrificed so that you could be the people you are today.



We are heirs to the faith of those who went before us. The question for you then is: What will be your legacy? What are you doing to bring others to faith in Jesus? What part are you playing in the great cloud of witness, the communion of saints, the mission of the Church?

My brothers and sisters, these are important questions. Because I believe that C.A.L.L. has a special mission in the life of our people and in the life of our nation. I believe that this project we've embarked upon is part of God's providential plan for America in the 21st century. We are being called to renew the face our people and our country. To make a new America.

Our people are thirsting for this renewal. We all want to move beyond this culture of secularism, materialism, and selfishness, with all its empty promises, false freedoms, and false roads to happiness. But in order to do that, our country needs to be evangelized again.

We are the ones God has called to bring the good news to a new generation. The good news that God became one of us so that we could be one with him. The good news that by his grace we can live by faith in Jesus and wait in joyful hope for the promise of the resurrection. The good news that we can know a love that is stronger than death.

Elegant proofs and arguments will only get us so far in this new century, in this new world. We will change the hearts and minds of our countrymen only if we ourselves become living examples of the Gospel we're called to proclaim.

So how do we do that? I want to suggest that we return to an ancient notion in the Church. One that animated the great saints and missionaries like Antonio Margil. And that is, *the practice of the virtues*. Your mission, my friends—what the Church expects, what the nation expects, and what God requires—is that you become men and women of virtue.

We don't think about *virtue* much anymore. In fact, the word is rarely heard and we don't have much of a concept of it anymore.

When is the last time you read a story in the newspaper or watched something on TV about a person who is truly "good"? In our media, we are always focusing on people's hidden motives, their self-interest. We're always wondering, "What was in it for them?" But we can't be so cynical,



my friends. Let us never lose our capacity to believe in goodness, in holiness, in virtue.

Since the earliest days of the Church, the true disciple of Christ has always been described as one who possessed and practiced certain virtues. Virtue simply means “excellence.” The virtues are what make us “excellent.”

Traditionally, the Church has identified seven virtues. There are the three “theological” virtues of *faith*, *hope*, and *charity*. And there are four “moral” virtues of *prudence*, *temperance*, *justice*, and *fortitude*.

These virtues are the habits that lead us to holiness. To being the people that God created us to be. That’s still our definition of a saint. If you look in the *Catechism*, a canonized saint is defined as someone who practiced the virtues to a “heroic” degree, with the help of grace (no. 828).

Yet as St. Paul so often reminded the first Christians, all baptized believers are “called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7). In other words, each of us is called to be saints, to lead a life animated by the virtues.

So when I say you must be men and women of virtue, I’m saying that you must be saints. And this isn’t something extraordinary. It’s what God created us to be. St. Gregory of Nyssa said: “The goal of the life of virtue is to become like God.”

Remember, it’s not only possible, but this is what Jesus came for and died for. So that you and I could become saints. Jesus said “You, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). The virtues are how we imitate Christ and become like God.

That’s why God gives us the virtues in baptism. Theologians say the virtues are “infused” in us. That means God gives them to us as a gift. He infuses the virtues in us so that we can know him and love him, and live as his sons and daughters.

The virtue of *faith* makes it possible for us to say “yes” to what God has revealed through Christ and his Church. To the truths he has revealed for our happiness and salvation.



Pope John Paul II used to tell this story about a friend who was a famous physicist. The man told John Paul that as a scientist, he was an atheist. Why? Because the scientific method couldn't produce any hard evidence for the existence of God.

But this same man was also a mountain climber and a lover of nature. Once he wrote to John Paul and told him: "Every time I find myself confronted with the grandeur of nature, of the mountain ranges, I feel that God exists."

St. Paul said something very similar. "Ever since the creation of the world, [God's] invisible nature ... has been clearly perceived in the things that have been created" (Rom. 1:20).

In other words, from the beauty and order of the world around us, our reason can lead us to conclude that there must be a Creator. But, my friends, God isn't content for us to know only that he exists. He wants us to know him personally, intimately. He wants us to know how much he loves us.

Reason alone can't give us that information. That's why he revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. And that's why he gives us the virtue of faith—so we can believe what Jesus revealed.

The virtue of *hope* helps us to trust in the things revealed by Christ. What do we hope for as believers in Christ? We hope to experience Christ's promise—that if we believe in him we will have eternal life (John 6:47, 54). Christian hope is not some kind of wishful thinking. Far from it, my friends. Jesus has been raised from the dead. So we can be certain in our hope that he will raise us up, too, to eternal life.

And that hope should make us bold and free. If we're destined for eternal life, how can we be scared of anything? We should be daring in living our faith.

The greatest of all the virtues, St. Paul said, is *charity* (1 Cor. 13:13). Charity is the gift that enables us to love God above all things, and our neighbors as ourselves.

When I think of this virtue today, I think about that great Sacred Heart that St. Francis Cabrini fashioned out of white stones on a mountain not far from here, in Golden. It was on her last visit to Denver in 1912. She took some of



her nuns and some of the orphans in their care. They drove a horse and buggy up a cow path to the foot of the hill. Then they climbed to the top and created this magnificent image of the love of Jesus.

That image reminds us that because of the heart of Jesus, because of his love, we are able to truly love. We are able to find the love of God in the love of our neighbor. And we are able to set our hearts on eternity, the love that never ends. All the other virtues—prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice—are means of achieving that love. That’s why the saints call charity the “Queen of the virtues.”

I wish we had time to talk about these other virtues. Unfortunately, we don’t. But I would encourage you to read, as spiritual reading, the *Catechism’s* article on the virtues (nos. 1803–1845). It is very beautiful and very practical. And I think it will help you grow in your love for our Lord.

What we need to talk about now is how we go about living these virtues of faith, hope, and love. Because that’s what God requires of us in a special way at this hour. That we be *ambassadors of faith, heralds of hope, and messengers of love.*

To be *ambassadors of faith* means you must stand up against the forces of our secular society. Our society treats religious faith as only a personal and private matter. It enforces a strict separation of faith from life.

Friends, we must reject this mentality. Your faith is more than private prayer and personal devotion. Your faith must illuminate everything you do. From how you love your spouses and raise your children, to how you run your businesses, to the kind of policies and politicians you support.

The truths of our faith are a challenge and a threat to many of the false values of our society. That’s why our society is so concerned to keep religion out of the public square. But you are called to be men and women of faith. That means you can’t accept any situation that would have you set aside the demands of Christ’s Gospel or the teachings of his Church.

Promise yourself that you will never turn your back on Jesus or the truths he died to proclaim. Promise yourself that you will never ignore or contradict the teachings of his Church—by either your words or your actions.



God still has something to say to this world that he created. This world he shed his own blood to redeem. And he wants to make his appeal to the world through you. Through the witness of your life.

My friends, you must also be *heralds of hope*.

Many of our brothers and sisters have accepted the lie that they don't need God to be happy. So they put their hope in things that can't last. They seek happiness in pleasures that will never satisfy. So many of them are like broken cups— desperately trying to fill themselves up, but never being able to.

You must talk to your neighbors about the great hope that is ours as children of God. Talk to them about heaven, about eternal life. Pray that the star of Christian hope will rise in the hearts of all our neighbors (*Spe Salvi*, 48).

Finally, my friends: You must be messengers of love. We can't say we love God if we aren't working to help our neighbors in need. We can't say we love our neighbors if we aren't willing to share with them the whole truth about God and the human person. The truth that will set them free.

To love God and to love our neighbor means telling the truth and being willing to sacrifice for that truth. The truth revealed by Jesus is that all human life is a sacred treasure. That each person is created in the image of God, and is desired by God, and loved by God.

Being a messenger of love means standing up to defend this truth whenever and wherever the image of God is being destroyed, threatened, mistreated, or abused. I was struck by what Pope Benedict said a couple weeks ago at World Youth Day: "How can it be that the most wondrous and sacred space—the womb—has become a place of unutterable violence?"

My friends, this is the question we have to ask our politicians and judges, our fellow countrymen, our medical establishment, our media. Especially in this election year. How can it be that the homicide of our littlest ones is tolerated in this great land of freedom?

Being messengers of love means working for a new America, an America where it is easier to love. Where life is cherished and welcomed—from the



child in the womb to the elderly and the handicapped, to the immigrant who comes to our land seeking a new life for his family.

This kind of love will cost you. True love always will. Jesus taught us that love means laying down your life for your brothers and sisters. For you, laying down your life might mean risking your reputation, your job, your re-election. But we have the promise of our Lord. That if we lose our lives for the sake of his Gospel, we will find our lives forever in him.

My friends, whether you realize it or not, you are called to be missionaries to a “new world.” It is not an undiscovered continent as it was when Father Antonio Margil came here. But it is uncharted territory. We live in one of the first societies in history that is trying to get along without God, as if he doesn’t exist or no longer matters. This is a brave new world, indeed.

Remember what we said earlier: We are not Catholics by chance. God wanted you to be Catholic for a reason. Let us give thanks to all those who helped to bring you to the faith—the saints, missionaries, and martyrs; the priests and religious; your parents and families. And let us pledge to be good stewards of the faith that has been handed on to us.

You may be the only Christians your neighbors and co-workers come in contact with on a regular basis. This is a great responsibility. And a great opportunity. You can’t read the Bible to them or recite the *Catechism*. Only a changed life will change lives.

So what you must do is show them a life transformed by the Gospel. You must be men and women of virtue—ambassadors of faith, heralds of hope, messengers of love.

Our nation is waiting for your witness. This new evangelization that proceeds from heart to heart, from soul to soul. An evangelization that once again opens our culture to the saving power of Jesus Christ.

I thank you for this chance to speak with you.

I pray that Our Lady of Guadalupe intercede for you and watch over you always.