

## **The Encounter with Christ and the Future of Hispanic Ministry**

Address to the National Catholic Council for Hispanic Ministry  
Symposium on “Paradigmatic Changes in Hispanic Ministry”

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus,

It's a great pleasure to welcome you to San Antonio! *¡Saludos, mis hermanos y hermanas!* There are so many things I want to talk about with you today in our short time together.

In a couple of weeks here we're going to be celebrating a great date in the history of our archdiocese. It will be the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's visit to San Antonio on September 13, 1987.

The Holy Father spent an extraordinary day here. A day filled with prayer and teaching. He recalled the first Mass celebrated on our soil. It was offered by Father Damián Massanet, a Franciscan missionary who came from Mexico. Not far from here. Along the riverbank on the Feast of St. Anthony, June 13, 1691.

San Antonio, John Paul said, has a very special calling that flows from our long history as “a meeting [place] of cultures, indigenous and immigrant” from every part of the world. San Antonio, he said, is “a crossroads . . . a symbol and a kind of laboratory testing America's commitment to her founding moral principles and human values.”

We take our historic mission very seriously here in San Antonio. We're very conscious that long before the Pilgrims and the Mayflower, the gospel was being proclaimed in this land in the Spanish tongue. We remember that the holy Mass was first celebrated on our soil long before the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Two weeks ago, on the Feast of the Assumption, we dedicated a new Eucharistic chapel and residence hall at our Assumption Seminary. It is one of the few seminaries in the country where men are trained for the priesthood in both Spanish and English. We're proud to be preparing men to answer a special calling of our times—to proclaim God's mercy and reconciliation in a society that is bilingual and multicultural.

My friends, I look at our gathering today as a historic moment, too. We come together at a time of great change. We face big changes in our national bishops' conference. Many of us are upset about these changes. We worry about what they might mean for our established ways of doing things.

We come together also at a time when our country is in the middle of a debate over the new Hispanic presence in America. It is an angry, fearful, and vindictive time. I have many deep feelings about these things, being both an American citizen and an immigrant who was born and raised in Mexico. I worry, my friends, that our country is losing touch with what John Paul called our "founding moral principles and human values."

But the point, my friends, is that we gather at a crossroads. Forces around us are calling our ministry to change. Fundamental change. Not only change in how we "do" our ministry. But change in how we think about our ministry. Change in how we define our mission.

I know that we are here to set some guidelines for future ministry in the United States. Let me say that we also need to find the way to work in union with the bishops of the United States. We also need to rely on our own Latino community—bishops and priests, deacons and seminarians, consecrated men and women, and the lay faithful—to accomplish the work of evangelization and holiness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in complete fidelity to God and his Church.

## *Kairos, the Time of Decision*

That's what I want to talk to you about today. You've chosen the theme of paradigmatic changes in Hispanic ministry.

The Scriptures don't talk much about paradigm change. Instead, the Bible talks about *kairos*— the time of decision. The hour when we all must choose which path we're going to follow.

“Now is the acceptable time—(*kairos*),” St. Paul said (2 Cor. 6:2). The time, the *kairos*, is always the time of decision about Christ.

Paul said in another place that when the *kairos* had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman. That we might no longer be slaves of sin, bound to die. That instead we might live in love as God's sons and daughters (Gal. 4:4–7).

Jesus himself said at the start of his ministry: “The *time* is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the only real paradigm that matters, my friends. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom is at hand. The decision each of us has to make every day is this: Will we repent and believe? Will we continue our daily conversion to Christ? Will we try every day to more and more conform our lives to Christ and to his teaching?

This applies to all our ministries, too. Now is the acceptable time. We need to reevaluate our ministries in light of the calling of Christ. The encounter with Christ. We need to purify our aims and means in light of his gospel. Do our ministries reflect the witness and teaching of Christ? Do our ministries truly serve his gospel and the kingdom of God?

I said a minute ago that forces around us are calling us to make fundamental changes in our ministry. I meant more than a divisive debate over immigration. More than bureaucratic changes in the USCCB. Maybe I can explain by telling you about something that happened here earlier this year. I will never forget the day.

It was a very rainy day last March, in fact there was flooding all around. It was actually the Feast of the Annunciation, the day we rejoice at the coming of our Savior in the womb of Mary. And I was in a small church standing in front of two tiny caskets. Sariyah Garcia was 14 months old. Her brother, Sebastian Lopez, was 4 months old. Their bodies had been found wrapped in trash bags and stuffed under their mother's house. They lived in a poor, largely Latino area here in San Antonio. Their mother, who is 19, later confessed that she had killed Sariyah, beat her to death, on Christmas Eve. Little Sebastian she killed a month or so later.

It was the saddest funeral Mass I've ever had to say. The community was in a state of shock. It is a poor community, but with a great spirit and a great sense of family and friendship. We were all badly shaken by the tragedy. How could this kind of thing have happened? Now, some people were mad at the government. They felt "the system" let these babies down. There might be some truth to that. An earlier report of child abuse had been filed against the mother, and apparently the child protection agency didn't take action fast enough.

But I still feel this tragedy is a sign of something deeper. Darker forces. It's a sign of a spiritual hole, something gone wrong in our community. We talk a lot about poverty and discrimination and the lack of opportunity for our people. These problems are real. And we have to continue our struggle for economic justice and better living and working conditions for our people. But we also see many signs of moral and spiritual poverty. We don't talk about that too much. But we need to start.

My friends, do you know that Hispanics have the highest unwed birthrate among any group in our country? Almost half of all Hispanic babies—45 percent—are born to unwed mothers. Just like Sariyah and Sebastian. That for every 100 children born in our community, another 23 are killed by abortion?

And what about our young people who are dropping out of high school? The government says that almost 30 percent of Hispanics aged 16 to 24 are drop-outs. What does that mean for their future? What does it mean for the future of our people?

I think about these statistics and I think about the findings of the Pew report on Latino religion. We need to be asking ourselves why so many of our brothers and sisters are leaving the Catholic faith for Protestant denominations. Why have so many of our brothers and sisters left the Church to practice “no religion” at all?

These are delicate questions, my friends. I know. But we can’t avoid them. This is the time of decision. Hispanics have always been a people of strong Catholic faith. A people of prayer. A people who value family, friendship, community, and the culture of life. The future of that identity is no longer certain.

What we need to ask ourselves is this: Why haven’t our ministries made more of a difference in the lives of our people? We’ve done many good things. We can point to a long list of accomplishments. But are we doing the things we *should* be doing? The things Jesus wants us to be doing? Are we truly serving his gospel and the kingdom?

### ***Five Goals of the U.S. Bishops***

I think the answer is that no matter what we’ve *been* doing in the past, now is the time to make a change. So what are we going to do?

My friends, we live in a radically secular and materialistic society. In this culture, spiritual values don’t make sense. This culture only values what can be bought and sold. What can be seen and touched. What can be used for our own pleasure. Our culture looks at *people* in these terms too—as objects and things to be exploited for selfish gain or private pleasure. This culture teaches us to think only of this world. It tells us that God is irrelevant and that religious faith and values are something we should keep to ourselves.

All this plays into the crisis we see in the Hispanic community. The dominant culture leads people to lose hope. To lose their moral compass. To live as if God doesn't exist. To follow all kinds of false illusions of happiness—in drugs, alcohol, sex, violence, and crime.

The U.S. bishops have identified five pastoral goals for the Church in the years ahead. They are very good goals. These goals are well chosen. They properly reflect the values of the gospel and they directly confront the challenges to the faith we face in this culture. At minimum, the bishops' five goals should be our goals in our Hispanic ministries. We should be able to justify and explain every one of our initiatives in light of these five goals.

The bishops' first goal is to *restore and promote the sanctity of marriage and family* as the fundamental cell of society. We can all see the need for this in our community. We need to teach the personal and social virtues that can lead our people to true happiness and love.

The bishops' second goal is to *educate and form people in the faith and in the faithful celebration of the sacraments*. Our people don't know the truths of their religion. That's why they abandon the Church and her moral teachings. We need to show them that Jesus is the fountain of holiness, a holiness that comes to them as a gift of grace in the sacraments.

The third goal is *the promotion of priestly and religious vocations*. We must promote holiness and discipleship in all that we do. We must especially raise up strong men and women willing to consecrate themselves to the intimate service of Jesus Christ and his kingdom.

The bishops' fourth goal is to *promote the life and dignity of the human person*. This too is an obvious need in our community. It should be the core of all our work for the common good.

Finally, the bishops identify as their fifth goal, *the promotion of cultural diversity and Hispanic ministry* “in the spirit of *Encuentro*.”

## *The Spirit of Encuentro*

Underlying every one of the bishops' goals is this concern for "Encuentro." For the encounter with Jesus Christ. For that *kairos* moment. If people don't encounter Jesus Christ through our ministries, then no matter how useful they are in other respects, our ministries are a failure.

Here too, we need to examine our consciences, friends. We have to make sure that the Jesus we proclaim is the true Jesus. I'm very concerned about this. Again, I hope you'll be patient as I give you an example from my own ministry.

Recently, I asked MACC to study the possibility of composing a Bible study for Latinos. They have been working hard and developed an interesting first draft that we are going to test as a pilot program. It is technically correct, done in good faith and with good intentions. I made some suggestions on how to improve the text and we are still working on making it better.

Because it is my idea and I'm working with Mr. Arturo Chavez and his staff, I've been reflecting on it, looking for the positive side of having a Bible study for Latinos. I can enumerate many good things that it will bring to the Hispanic community.

But I had some questions as I was praying about the introduction to this Bible study. The introduction is meant to help people start thinking about Jesus. The people are asked to reflect on "Who Jesus is in my life?" and "Who is Jesus for us as a community of disciples?"

To inspire reflection, the study provides four pictures of Jesus to look at. One is an Anglo-looking man with long flowing hair and serious eyes. The second one is a Chinese man in a straw hat holding a small baby animal in his arms. The third is a black Jesus shown crucified above a city on a cross made of steel girders. Finally, there is a Jesus who was made to look like a Native American medicine man.

I came to the conclusion that it's hard to picture Jesus. Nobody knows what he looked like. Then, I thought: not one of these pictures even attempted to portray the Jesus we find described in the gospels. The real Jesus. The Jesus who was a Jew. A son of David and a son of Man. The Jesus who at the same time was also the Son of God and the man of heaven. The Jesus who took flesh and blood in the womb of Mary and who rose from the tomb by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That's the real Jesus. The Jesus who dwelt among us at a concrete time in history and at a concrete place. A Jesus who is with us today in Word and sacrament. All these other Jesuses are just abstractions.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16: 15) Notice. That's a very different question than, "Who is Jesus in my life and for my community?"

To ask who Jesus is *in my life* has the danger of turning the question inside out. Suddenly we're not talking about Jesus anymore. We're talking about ourselves. About our expectations, our grievances, our needs. When you ask the question that way, you end up with a Jesus who looks a lot like you. Or like the people in your community.

You cannot encounter Jesus Christ, true God and true man, by such a method. You can only encounter yourself. But not even that. Because unless we know Jesus, the true Jesus, we can't truly know ourselves.

That's my point, my friends. Often we have very good intentions. We want to remind people who are suffering, who feel marginalized and excluded, that they are loved by God. But we can't use Jesus as a means to an end. No matter how well-intentioned our ends may be.

We'll continue to work together with MACC to develop a Bible study program that can bring people to Jesus. A program that will enable them to see themselves in him. That they may be able to encounter Jesus Christ, Perfect God, Perfect Man. Our Savior and Redeemer.

## *La Palabra de Dios*

Blessed Mother Teresa has been in the news a lot in the past week. It is always a great thing to see a saint on the cover of *Time* magazine! It's almost been ten years since she died. I remember the story about when she came to Nezahualcóyotl, Mexico. She was talking to the very poor people there. People living in the worst conditions. She asked them what their greatest need was. One man spoke for all the rest. He said: *La Palabra de Dios*.

That is the message I want to leave you with, my friends. Our people are hungry for the Word of God. *La Palabra de Dios*. They want the word of truth. That should be the guiding aim of all Hispanic ministry.

Our people do not want or need a Jesus who looks like them. We need the true Jesus who calls each one of us to become like him. The Jesus we meet in the pages of sacred Scripture. The Jesus we meet personally in prayer and in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance.

St. Augustine, whose feast we celebrate today, once heard Christ's voice say: "I am the food of the strong; grow and you shall feed on me; but you shall not change me, like the food of your flesh, into yourself, but you shall be changed into my likeness" (*Confessions*, 7.10).

The true Jesus alone can set our people free from all that holds them in bondage—from sin, from selfishness, from death. From all the structures of sin that keep us from building a more Christian society, a society based on the ethical principles of our religion.

This is the Jesus who calls us to follow him. To be his disciples. To be missionaries. This is what our ministries should be all about. Being disciples and being missionaries.

Jesus calls us to be saints, my friends. I talk a lot about the saints because I believe that only saints can save America. Saints brought the faith to this land. And only saints will preserve that faith and make it thrive.

I hope you will see it as your life's goal to become a saint. That's what it means to be a disciple.

I hope you will see it as the goal of your ministry to help our people become saints, too. That's what it means to be a missionary.

I urge you to learn the stories of our saints in the Americas and to tell their stories in your ministries. Especially our Latin American saints and blessed. Our people need to remember their stories, to know their struggles against sin, injustice, and oppression.

This evening, I want to leave you with the story of one of them. Venerable Maria de la Luz Camacho. She lived in Mexico City during the atheist persecutions of the Church in the 1920s and 1930s. She was a very talented and beautiful laywoman who dedicated her life to serving the gospel as a catechist. When the communists came to her neighborhood to burn the church down, she stood in front of the door and blocked their way. They shot her dead. But their plans to destroy the church were foiled.

Maria used to say that God would always give her the grace to be faithful to him. You must believe that too, my friends. And we have to be like Maria Camacho. Defending our people against the forces that would threaten their Catholic identity and faith. Willing to resist these forces to the point of shedding our blood (Heb. 12:4).

So, I hope that we can keep in mind during these days and in the future of Hispanic ministry in our country the importance of the five goals of the U.S. bishops. I hope we can keep in mind the need to look for the face of Christ, for that personal encounter with him in the bread and in the Word. In fidelity to the gospel and the Church.

My friends, the fashions of pastoral ministry come and go. But Jesus Christ remains the same—yesterday and today and forever. Let us make the gospel our only paradigm. Let us make “repent and believe in the gospel” our only mission statement and our daily task.

I pray that Our Lady of Guadalupe, our Mother, will watch over and guide you in all that you do for her children, our people.