

**The Encounter with Jesus Christ  
And the New Evangelization of American Culture**

To Participants in the Tenth Anniversary Conference  
of New Evangelization of America (NEA)

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My friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ: It is so good to be here with you to celebrate this important anniversary!

How far we have come in the past ten years in this vital and noble work—*the new evangelization of America!*

The mission of NEA, which flows directly from the 1997 Synod for America, is truly *apostolic*. We are helping the Church to carry out the mission that our Lord entrusted to his apostles—to preach the good news of the Gospel to the ends of the earth, to teach all the nations what it means to love and to be a child of God.

That good news, as you know, is not an idea or a set of principles to live by. It's not a philosophy of life. The good news of the Gospel is a divine person—with a face and a name, and a heart that beats with the very love of God.

More than 500 years after the Gospel was first proclaimed in the New World, *Jesus Christ* is the good news that we want to propose again to America—in new ways and with renewed energy and renewed dedication!

*The new evangelization is an encounter with Jesus Christ.* This was Pope John Paul II's message. It is the centerpiece of his vision for the *ecclesia*, the Church in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And as we recall the anniversary of that historic synod, and as we look ahead to the challenges that face us, let us never forget that the reason and purpose for our every initiative is to help people come to know and love Jesus.

### **America's First Evangelization**

You know, in San Antonio we're also marking a big anniversary this year. In fact, we're about to enter the final month of a Jubilee Year we've been celebrating in honor of the 275th anniversary of our San Fernando Cathedral.

San Fernando is one of the first Catholic cathedrals in North America. It was founded in 1731. To put that into perspective: that's one year before the first president of the United States was born. It's about a half-century before the Declaration of Independence.

The Christian faith was brought to our region long before that. In fact, we got our name, *San Antonio*, because the Holy Eucharist was first celebrated along the riverbank there on the Feast of St. Anthony, in 1691.

But even 1691 is actually rather late in our country's first evangelization. The Spanish missions to Florida date to almost a century-and-a-half before that. And the first martyr to die on American soil, Father Juan de Padilla—who came to our country from Mexico and evangelized in Texas, California, and elsewhere—was killed in southern Kansas sometime in the early 1540s.

These things about our country's history have been on my mind a lot as we've been celebrating our Jubilee in San Antonio. How deep our country's Catholic roots run! How much here in the Southwest these Catholic roots are inseparable from our Hispanic history and heritage!

But I've also been thinking that it's the same throughout the United States, Canada, and the countries of Latin and South America. From their earliest settlement, *these lands were Catholic, Christian. And these lands were, from the start, immigrant lands, meeting places of cultures.*

I think about San Antonio, for instance, where we have such a beautiful array of peoples and cultures—Mexicans, Hungarians, Poles, and Czechs, the sons and daughters of immigrants from Spain, France, Italy, Ireland, the Philippines, Vietnam and many other lands.

San Antonio is a Catholic city. It has been since that first Eucharist in 1691. And our Catholicism is rooted and grows from the many cultures that brought the Gospel to this country along with their unique customs and popular piety. This is the story, too, in countless other cities throughout the United States. And it's true throughout the Americas.

Long before America had a name, the Gospel was being preached in these lands and the Holy Mass was being celebrated. Jesus Christ was here first—in Word and sacrament—changing lives and destinies, sowing the seeds of a civilization of love.

### **Obstacles to the New Evangelization**

Here in the United States, I'm afraid, we don't reflect on these things nearly enough. But more and more I'm coming to believe that the new evangelization requires us, as Catholics and Americans, to develop a very clear understanding of who we are and where come from.

Why do I say that? Because, as Pope John Paul often warned, the biggest obstacles we face to the new evangelization are *cultural*. This year also marks the 20th anniversary of

John Paul's fourth apostolic visit to the United States. In fact, in September we'll be commemorating the historic day he spent teaching and celebrating Mass in San Antonio.

One of the Pope's themes during that visit was the culture of consumerism. In his homily at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, he said this: "The Church faces a particularly difficult task in her efforts to preach the Word of God in all cultures in which *the faithful are constantly challenged by consumerism and a pleasure-seeking mentality*, where utility, productivity, and hedonism are exalted while God and his law are forgotten" (Sept. 16, 1987, in *The Pope Speaks to the American Church*, 293).

My brothers and sisters, that unfortunately describes the culture here in the United States. And with globalization I fear that this culture threatens to spread more and more throughout the Americas and the world. In fact, in *Ecclesia in America*, John Paul listed "unbridled consumerism" as one of the disturbing marks of our continent (no. 44).

This is the culture we are called to evangelize. The culture of consumerism is not a culture worthy of the great dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. The human person is far more than the sum of what he buys and sells, or the size of his house, or the kinds of music he downloads to his iPod.

A consumer society is a society governed by materialism. It says that only "things" matter or *money* which we can exchange for things. A society governed by materialism is necessarily a secularized society, one that has no room for God and no need for spiritual values.

And there are powerful forces now at work that are openly hostile to religion. I believe that *practical atheism* has become a sort of quasi-official religion in the United States and elsewhere in the Americas. What do I mean by that? That more and more, in order to live in society, to participate in its economic and political life, people are required to essentially conduct themselves as if God doesn't exist.

Another thing that is happening in our culture is a kind of “new nativism.” We see this obviously in the immigration debate, but the problem is more widespread. In fact, the ethnic and immigrant profile of our people is being replaced by a kind of bland, consumer model. We’re no longer identified by our ancestors and our heritage but by our “lifestyle” choices, or by what we like to buy. This again is an artificial identity and it denies our legacy as a nation of immigrants and a meeting place of cultures.

The result of these trends is a very sad poverty, my friends. For there is no greater poverty than to not know God, and to not know the way to find him. And many of our brothers and sisters are lost. In our consumer culture, faith in Jesus is reduced to one of many lifestyle alternatives in a vast marketplace filled with false paths and false promises of happiness and redemption. Traditional values and moral norms are also seen as lifestyle options, something individuals can choose or ignore.

*How far we have fallen from our noble beginning, our first evangelization!* The Christians faith that was once the foundation of our common culture is now portrayed as a dangerous and foreign idea, something that is alien to people’s happiness and well-being, something that threatens our freedoms and our way of life.

### **A Snapshot From New Mexico, February 1634**

As I see it, my friends, the obstacles we face in the new evangelization of America are cultural.

The question then is what are we going to do about these things, how are we going to evangelize this culture, this new America? As we think about how to answer that question, ten years after the Synod for America, I’d like to read you an excerpt from an early account of the missions in New Mexico. It was written by a Spanish Franciscan, Fray Alonso de Benavides, in February 1634. He writes:

In every pueblo where a friar resides, he has schools for the teaching of praying, singing, playing musical instruments, and other interesting things. Promptly at dawn, one of the Indian singers, whose turn it is that week, goes to ring the bell for [morning prayer] . . . . [After that] the bell is rung for Mass. All go into the church, the friar says Mass and administers the sacraments. . . . Mass over . . . all kneel down by the church door and sing the *Salve [Regina]* in their own tongue.

Fray Alonso goes on to describe how after Mass every day the friars and their Indian converts would spend time serving the poor and the sick. The missionaries oversaw schools and visited neighboring pueblos to baptize converts, hear confessions, and to offer guidance and advice. They were involved in the local economy, helping people run their farms and raise cattle and sheep.

Fray Alonso says, and I quote: “One of the greatest tasks of the friars is to [mediate] the disputes of the Indians among themselves, for, since they look upon him as a father, they come to him with all their troubles, and he has to take pains to harmonize them.” He concludes his report by commemorating the martyrs, saying that their work to spread the Gospel has been “watered with the blood and lives of ten of their brethren” (*Documents of American Catholic History*, I:15–17).

I wanted to share this little snapshot from our country’s first evangelization because in it I think we can find insights for our own work of the new evangelization.

What Fray Alonso is giving us, really, is a picture of how to evangelize a culture. Notice that the friars and their lay associates are involved in every area of the people’s lives—education and social service, work and worship; they’re also trying to shape the arts, teaching singing and music.

These first evangelizers cared for the people’s material and spiritual needs. One of their greatest tasks was being peacemakers, reconciling opposing factions in their communities, seeking social harmony and the common good. Notice that their days were

centered on the Eucharist and prayer, and that people were taught to pray in their own language. Finally, these first evangelizers recognized that they belonged to a communion of saints—they remembered the martyrs who had died to help them spread the faith.

### **To Meet the Living God in Christ**

There are many lessons here for us, my friends.

Like America's first evangelists, we must go fearlessly into the heart of our culture, into the heart of our people's lives—bringing the Gospel into their homes, into all their many occupations, into their schools and into their arts and sciences, into the media and into the political arena.

Why did the first evangelists here teach music and song to their converts? Because there is nothing truly human that is alien to the Gospel. And no authentic human culture can close itself off from God, who is the source of all truth, goodness, and beauty.

So, my brothers and sisters, we must once more open our culture—our poetry and literature, our music and movies, our art and all our ordinary work and conversation—to the transcendent, to the mystery of God.

The new evangelization means we must inspire people to seek Christ in everything they do—to seek to be his friend, to seek to love him, and to glorify him.

More and more in our culture the human person is downgraded and degraded. That means we need to be tireless in presenting the divine “personalism” of the Gospel—to show that each person is precious in God's eyes, and that each person has a part to play in God's plan for the world.

There is a beautiful quote from our Holy Father, Pope Benedict, that explains this. In fact, It comes from one of his first messages as Pope: “Only when we meet the living God in

Christ do we know what life is. We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary” (Homily, April 24, 2005).

The new evangelization means helping people to discover their vocation, what God is calling them to do. As our continent’s first evangelists did, we need to help promote a spirituality of work and everyday life. There can be no separation of our faith from our works, *all of our works*—in the home, in the marketplace, on the job, in our government. This was another key theme of *Ecclesia in America* (nos. 26, 30). We are called to be holy. Not holy like monks who live set apart from the world, but holy *in the world*.

By the kinds of lives we lead, through the things we produce and through the work we do, we must help people discover God in the ordinary and the everyday—in work and worship, in caring service to our families and neighbors.

### **A New Formation in the Faith**

We also have some rebuilding to do, my friends. The effects of consumerism and secularism have eroded the basic beliefs of many of our Catholic people. We need to do some *re*-education, some *re*-formation of our people.

It is unfortunately true that many Catholics no longer know with certainty what Christ and his Church teaches, or why it is important for them to know and believe these things. In the face of a culture that distorts the Church’s teachings and denies the existence of moral truths, many of our people are confused about how to live.

I think the two most important areas we need to work on in our new evangelization is the identity of Christ and the identity of the Church. Too often Jesus is treated as if he was just a historical figure, a holy man perhaps but not the Son of God. And there is also a bad tendency to treat the Church as only an old institution, guided by human prejudice and weakness.

We need to help people see again the divine nature of Christ and his Church, and how the two can never be separated. We have to help people see that when the Church speaks, she speaks with the voice of Christ.

How do we do this? We begin by rooting our lives and everything we do in the Scriptures, in prayer, and in the Eucharist. No one will believe us if we're not true believers ourselves. As those first evangelists began their day with prayer and Mass, we too must be diligent in striving for holiness.

My brothers and sisters, keep growing closer to Jesus; keep trying every day to live more the way he did; keep meeting him in the Eucharist, in the Bible, and in prayer. Keep growing, too, in your love for his Church and in your knowledge of her teachings, especially her social doctrine.

If we do this, our witness to the faith will be pure. It won't be simply a matter of providing facts or information. We'll be helping to form people in the ways of God, helping them to become the men and women that God created them to be.

Like the friars in New Mexico during the first evangelization, we must also promote a culture of life and peace.

We live in violent, angry times, my friends. Yet the good news we proclaim is the good news of God's mercy, of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. So let our new evangelization be a message of hope and mercy. Let us teach our brothers and sisters how to forgive one another and how to be merciful as our Father in heaven is merciful.

### **America's Communion of Saints**

Our American Catholic culture and heritage is one of peace, justice, mercy, and

reconciliation. In this heritage—in our saints, sacraments, and traditions—we find values that our culture has forgotten but desperately needs to remember.

We must keep that heritage alive in the new evangelization. And we must recover that sense of the communion of saints that we find in America’s first evangelists.

This is perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of the Synod for America—its concern to promote devotion to our local saints and blessed. As John Paul said: “The saints are the true expression and the finest fruits of America’s Christian identity. . . . *Their example of boundless dedication to the cause of the Gospel . . . must become better and more widely known among the faithful of the continent*” (*Ecclesia in America*, 15).

This is so important, my friends. We need to know our saints and blessed, to learn their life stories, their words. We need to imitate and draw inspiration from them. And we need to seek their heavenly intercession.

In these holy men and women, God reveals to us the American face of Christ, the way of holiness that is uniquely suited to the challenges of our culture. John Paul provides a list of many of our saints and blessed in *Ecclesia in America*, especially in footnote 35 of that document. I urge you to get to know them yourselves and to find new ways to make their stories known among our people.

In the ten years since the synod, even more holy men and women have been added to the rolls of America’s saints. In fact, this past October, Pope Benedict canonized two—St. Théodore Guérin, a missionary nun in 19th-century in Indiana, and St. Rafael Guízar Valencia.

I’d like to close today by talking to you a little bit about St. Rafael. As a bishop during the Mexican revolution of the 1920s, he devoted his life to the poor and the oppressed, and for that he suffered persecution and exile. In fact, during one of his exiles he preached missions in San Antonio and said Mass in our great San Fernando Cathedral.

He was known as the “bishop of the poor” and was a great promoter of vocations to the priesthood. He had great faith, the kind of faith we need as we seek to evangelize an indifferent or often hostile culture. San Rafael said once: “I know the [Church’s] persecutors will be dead and gone before long. The Church is never going to be gone.”

### **Children of San Rafael**

Last year, I had the privilege of co-celebrating a Mass in his honor. Among those present in San Fernando Cathedral were many members of St. Rafael’s family.

But my brothers and sisters, we are all the spiritual children of San Rafael, of St. Théodore, of Fray Alonso and Juan de Padilla, of the founders of San Fernando Cathedral, and the countless others who sacrificed themselves to bring the Gospel to these lands we call America.

Everywhere in these great lands we walk on hallowed ground, in the footsteps of the saints and blessed, known and unknown, who have gone before us. The mission of the new evangelization is to raise up a new generation of American saints, a generation that I pray will include each one of us.

In the mystery of God’s history of salvation, America was born as a communion of cultures—all formed by the preaching of the Gospel, all united by a belief in the truths and values of that Gospel, especially the values of human dignity and freedom, and our common duty to love God and love our neighbor.

It is our privilege and our duty to assist our heavenly Father in the fulfillment of his plan for America. There is no more important thing that we could devote our lives to than this work of the new evangelization. There is no greater love that we could have for our brothers and sisters than to want to share Jesus with them!

Ten years have passed, my friends, since that historic Synod. We have done much and there is much that remains to be done. I thank you for the privilege of being able to address you today.

And may our Lady of Guadalupe, the Queen of the Americas, the bright star of the New Evangelization, pray for us.