

¡Necesitamos a Dios!
The Vision of Benedict XVI and the Challenge to Latino Leaders Today

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Greetings, my brothers and sisters! It is so very good to be with you today!
¡Saludos, hermanos y hermanas! ¡Es muy bueno estar con ustedes hoy!

I'm very grateful for your invitation to speak with you today. It's always good to be in Philadelphia. This is "the city of brother love." For me it's also a city of saints—*una ciudad de santos*. A place where holy men and women like St. Katharine Drexel, St. John Neumann and Father Felix Varela lived and did great works for God. It's a place where I hope you are all trying to do great things for God, too. I hope are all trying to be *santos*, too.

As you all know, this is a very exciting day in the life of our country. Later today our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, arrives in Washington to begin his six-day pilgrimage to America.

In fact, after this, I'll be traveling to Washington to pray with the Pope and to meet with him and celebrate Mass with him. I'm excited about that. It's always a privilege and gift to be in the presence of the Pope.

I want to talk with you today about Benedict. But you are such a distinguished group and these are such exciting times, there are many things I would like to talk with you about. It's hard to choose!

The Holy Father is here so of course we need to talk about him. But it's also an election year. I know your state's primary is next week. So I think we should also talk about some of the important issues we face in our country and in our Latino community.

But first, the Pope.

You know, we've been blessed in this generation to have some of the finest popes ever in the history of the Church.

I have a special place in my heart for John Paul II because he called me to be a bishop and then an archbishop. And because he was such a great personal role model of courage and holiness. But he was also one of the most important figures on the world stage in the late 20th century.

The world is a much different place today than it was before John Paul was Pope. He was not solely responsible for bringing about the end of the Cold War and the Marxist movement in the Third World. But it's hard to imagine how those things would have been achieved without his moral leadership.

Now on the outside, Benedict is a very different kind of leader. He's much quieter. He is a gentle and almost shy man. But like John Paul he is a man of prayer and action and a man of great learning.

Benedict doesn't attract as much attention as John Paul did. But I think he is one of the wisest moral leaders in the world today. He has a beautiful and powerful vision for the world and for each one of us. You will hear that in his homilies in Washington and New York.

You will hear that also when he speaks to the United Nations on Friday. He is perhaps the greatest voice for peace and reason in our times. If we all had ears to hear what he was saying, the world would be a much more beautiful and happy place.

Today, I want to share with you two aspects of Benedict's vision that I think are important.

The first is this: The world needs God. And we need God. *¡El mundo necesita a Dios! ¡Necesitamos a Dios!* Every one of us. No one can live without Him. We know, my friends, that many of our brothers and sisters *try* to live without God. We see it all around us. But they wind up filling their lives with substitutes for God—possessions, amusements, money, power. All sorts of selfish passions and obsessions.

They are searching for happiness. That's a good thing. God made us to be happy. But, as Benedict says, we can't be truly happy without God.

¡Necesitamos a Dios! But not just any "god." That's another thing Benedict reminds us. There are a lot of false ideas about God in the world today—that God is angry, that God demands vengeance and terror against his "enemies." That God is just the god of one race or one group of people.

Also, we human beings tend to make "gods" in our own image. In other words, we construct images of "god" that make us feel better about ourselves. We imagine a god who isn't going to judge us or impose laws or moral restrictions on us.

We don't need those kinds of "gods." Those are false gods. They can't save us, because they aren't real. But following those "gods" can do a lot of damage. They can lead us down dead-end paths. They can destroy us.

The true God is not some abstract idea either. Some Higher Power or Supreme Creator standing above the world. The true God has shown us his face in Jesus Christ.

Benedict says these things over and over.

The true God loves each one of us so much that he came down from heaven to share in our humanity. To become one of us. God opened his heart to us on the cross and he continues to give us his body and blood in the Eucharist. The living God chose to give his life for us so that we might forever share in his divine life.

So, Benedict says we need God. *¡Necesitamos a Dios!* The God who has revealed his face to us in Jesus Christ.

What does that mean for us, friends? It means we need to get to know Jesus better—through quiet prayer, through reading the Gospel, through going to Mass and partaking of the sacraments.

That's what Benedict is going to tell me, too, when I see him tomorrow. When Benedict talks to bishops and cardinals he talks to us about prayer, about reading the Scriptures. About thinking with the mind of Christ and loving with the heart of Christ.

He has the same message for you, too: We all need to know and love Jesus better. To give our lives to God. Fully. Completely.

This brings me to the second important teaching of Benedict that I want to share with you. That is: that our lives matter very deeply to God. Each one of your lives. My life.

Benedict put it beautifully in his first homily after being named Pope: “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.” *¡Cada uno de nosotros es querido, cada uno es amado, cada uno es necesario!*

This isn't a new idea. Nothing that Benedict says isn't already in the Scriptures or in the ancient teaching of the Church. But we need to hear these things again in our day, my friends! And we need to take them to heart.

The truth is that whether you are aware of it or not, each of you was created specially by God and given a special calling from God. A special role to play in God's plan to make all men and women into one family through the new covenant of Christ. Each of you has a part to play in helping his kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

The world needs God. *¡El mundo necesita a Dios!* And each of us is created by God with a purpose—to bring the good news of God's love to our brothers and sisters. *Nosotros existimos para enseñar Dios a los hombres.*

This brings me to the final thing I want to talk to you about this morning. How do we make this vision of the Pope, this vision of Christ and the Catholic Church, a reality in our society?

The Church has a rich social teaching. I urge you to learn as much as you can about it and try to promote that teaching in your work, in your communities, and in our political system. The Church's teaching truly represents a radiant vision for how human society can reflect the priorities and justice of our Creator.

Unfortunately, we don't have the time to talk about all the important issues in this election year. But I do want to speak with you about an issue that seems to have dropped off the radar in this year's presidential election.

I'm talking about the 10 to 12 million Latinos who are presently forced to live in the shadows, at the margins of this great country.

These brothers and sisters of ours don't have a name or a face in our society. They are widely regarded, not so much as people, but as a "category." They are "illegals" or "undocumented." For many in our society, these brothers and sisters of ours have become a threat. The enemy.

One of the candidates for President came to your city last month and delivered an important speech on race in America. But he didn't say much about the discrimination—and, yes, the *racism*—against Latinos in this country, especially immigrants from Mexico. This issue is very personal for me, as I know it is for many of you. I'm both an American citizen and a proud immigrant, born and raised in Mexico.

Unfortunately anti-immigrant sentiment and anti-Hispanic bias is a problem today, even among our fellow Catholics. I don't want to over-dramatize the situation. But we do need to be honest and recognize that racial prejudice is a driving factor behind a lot of our political conversation about immigration.

The issue seems to have died down for the moment. But it isn't going to go away. And it shouldn't.

Although federal immigration reform was killed in Congress last year after a bitter debate, more than 240 new laws were passed in 46 of our 50 states last year ("Immigration and the Bishops," *First Things* [Feb. 2008]; "The Ethics of Immigration: An Exchange," *First Things* [May 2008]).

Many of these new laws are harsh and punitive. And already they're creating injustices and economic hardships throughout the country.

I read a story in *The New York Times* two weeks ago about one of the largest tomato growers in the Northeast. He's here in Pennsylvania, in Clarks Summit. He had to shut down his business because many of his workers are being deported. He's been threatened with big fines and maybe jail if he's caught employing any workers who aren't U.S. citizens.

You can open the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* almost every day, and find evidence that our nation's economy can't prosper or even operate efficiently without a large immigrant workforce.

Globalization has changed the way businesses operate and the way people work in our hemisphere. This is a reality that will not change, no matter what presidential candidates promise about trade agreements and other issues.

The reality is that businesses no longer make their products locally for sale in domestic markets. Now their production facilities are located all over the world. The markets for their products are likewise international. Even small farmers and small businesses now find they are competing in a worldwide market.

That means workers in this country are competing for jobs with workers in Latin countries and other countries around the world. The wages and benefits paid in those other countries now have a direct influence on the wages and benefits paid to workers in this country.

Globalization has exposed—and in some cases made worse—the economic inequalities and injustices that exist within and between nations.

The bottom line is that as long as workers can earn more in one hour in the U.S. than they can earn in a day or a week in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, they will continue to migrate to this country.

We need to come together, my friends, and find a solution to the complicated economic, national security, and legal issues raised by immigration.

If our economy is truly in a recession, and the experts seem to think it is, it's only a matter of time before Latino immigrants are again being singled out as scapegoats.

But my friends, this issue is moral as well as economic and political. In fact, I believe immigration is the great civil rights test of our generation.

There are millions of people—our neighbors, our brothers and sisters in Christ—living in our midst without freedom, without rights. They are subject to exploitation, not only by business interests and human traffickers, but by politicians seeking to score political points. This is a grave human rights issue.

And we need to promote solutions to this tragedy that reflect the values of Jesus Christ and the gospel.

In Catholic social teaching, the right to migrate is among the most basic human rights. It's very close to the right to life. Why? Because God our Father in heaven has created the good things of this world to be shared by all men and women—not just a privileged few.

That means that if a person can't find the necessities of life for his family, he has the right to leave his country and to seek these things in some other country.

Now, it's true that the right to immigration is not absolute. Church teaching does allow governments to regulate immigration. To weigh the impact of immigration on their control of their borders, their economies, and their national security.

But no country can deny this basic human right out of exaggerated fears for security or selfish concerns about threats to domestic jobs or standards of living.

And Catholic teaching presumes that the more prosperous a country is, the more generous that country should be in welcoming immigrants.

More than that, the Church's teaching requires public authorities to ensure that foreign workers enjoy the "same rights enjoyed by nationals . . . without discrimination" (*Compendium on the Social Teaching of the Church*, nos. 297–298).

The Church also says that immigration policy should respect families. It should work to keep families together and to reunite families that have become separated by immigration.

These principles are not only moral, they are reasonable. And they should be the basis of all our discussions and debates.

But there is something even deeper involved here, my friends. It has to do with our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Christ identified himself with the poor and the displaced. Early in his human life, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were forced by political circumstances to migrate to Egypt, where they lived and worked as immigrants and strangers in a foreign land.

And we all know these words of Jesus: “For I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:35, 40).

This is not just a pretty idea, my friends. This is our Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth, telling us that he is present among us in the migrant worker. In the illegal and the undocumented. And that God will judge us by how we treat these least of our brethren. What we do to them, we do to Jesus.

This sense has been totally lost in the rhetoric of the immigration debates. To listen to talk radio or the cable news, and even to some of our politicians—it’s as if the immigrant isn’t even a person. Instead he’s only a thief or a terrorist or a simple work-animal.

We need to help our neighbors to see the face of God in our immigrant brothers and sisters. We need to remind them what the Gospel says: If we say we love God and yet despise our neighbor, we are liars (cf. 1 John 4:20–21).

My friends, thank you for this opportunity to talk to you today! It has been a privilege.

This is a week of special grace for our country as our Holy Father, the Vicar of Christ, comes among us to pray and to teach.

I pray that it be a time of renewal for each of us. A time for us to rededicate ourselves to living the call of the Gospel.

My brothers and sisters, remember: *¡Cada uno de nosotros es querido, cada uno es amado, cada uno es necesario!* You are here for a reason. Each one of you. God has something special he wants you to do.

¡El mundo necesita a Dios! The world needs God. And God needs you to help bring the good news about him to our brothers and sisters, especially those in most need of his mercy. *Nosotros existimos para enseñar Dios a los hombres.*

I pray that you follow the example of that great saint from Philadelphia, Katharine Drexel. She followed Christ in serving the poor, especially African Americans and Native Americans. I pray that you will follow Christ in doing all you can to bring his justice and love to the newest Americans, our immigrant brothers and sisters.

St. Katharine and St. John Neumann, pray for us!

And 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.