

**“Today It Is Your Turn”:
Young Hispanic Leaders and the New Evangelization**

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My dear young friends, my brothers and sisters in the risen Lord Jesus Christ: How good it is to be here with you!

I welcome you to this important *encuentro*. In this *encounter with the living Jesus Christ*, we come to consider the meaning of our lives and our purpose in the Church. This *encuentro* is also a sign that we are at a new stage in our journey as a people and as a Church, early in this new millennium, more than 500 years since the gospel was first preached in the Americas.

In San Antonio, where I’m from, we’re celebrating the 275th anniversary of our San Fernando Cathedral, which is one of the first Catholic churches in North America, established in 1731. That’s one year before the first president of the United States was even born.

Our diocese was founded by Spanish-speaking missionaries—priests and families. Even the name, *San Antonio*, reflects our city’s Hispanic origins. Just look at a map and think of how many places, especially in the Southwest, are named in Spanish for saints, sacraments, and articles of our faith—*Corpus Christi*, *Las Cruces*, *Los Angeles*, *the Sangre de Cristos Mountains*. Our nation’s geography testifies to the rich history and cultural legacy of the Hispanic presence in America.

My friends, you are a part of this long legacy and glorious tradition! It is a tradition that transcends borders of North and South. Recently, I visited Lima, Peru, to take part in celebrations for the 400th anniversary of the death of Santo Toribio de Mogrovejo, a great evangelist and missionary and the second bishop of Lima. The history of the Church in Latin America is your history, too.

We are heirs to the faith and sacrifices of all those who first preached the gospel in the New World, the Americas, North and South. We're connected to these first evangelists by a common culture and shared beliefs, and by the Eucharist. And we are called, you and I, to be the evangelists of the next generation, bearing witness to the reality and power of Christ at a time when our country seems to have forgotten him.

That's the reason we're here—to talk about the *future*, to talk about you and your place in the Church and in this country of ours. The theme of our encounter this weekend is, *Tejiendo el Futuro Juntos*— “Weaving the Future Together.”

Christian hope for the future is always rooted in the past. We *remember the past with gratitude*—for Jesus Christ has died once for all, that all might live forever for God. We *live in the present with enthusiasm*—because Christ has risen and dwells with us, in our hearts, in our tabernacles, in the faces of the poor, until the end of the age. We *look forward to the future with confidence*—because Christ will come again in glory, to welcome us into His kingdom where there will be no end (John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 1).

Walking with the Saints of North and South America

Every moment, we live in the company of Jesus. And we live in the company of all those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith. This is what the communion of saints means. St. Paul called it the great “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1). In a special way, you and I are

always in the company of the saints and beatified of North and South America.

In his pastoral plan for the American Church in the new millennia, Pope John Paul II urged us get to get to know our local saints and beatified—to learn their life stories and words, to imitate and draw inspiration from them, to seek their intercession (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 15).

In this spirit, I would like to talk to you today about Blessed Jose Anacleto Gonzalez Flores and his eight companions. They are among the Church's newest "blesseds," beatified in Guadalajara, Mexico in November 2005.

Blessed Anacleto and his companions were ordinary Catholics. One was a priest, the rest lay people. Some, like Blessed Anacleto, were pastoral ministers, teaching the faith and helping the poor. One was an auto mechanic. Another was a musician, and another a student. Almost all of them were married and some were fathers of large families. One, Blessed Jose Sanchez del Rio, was killed just weeks before his 15th birthday.

These young people were 20th-century martyrs. They were among the thousands tortured and murdered for defending their faith in Jesus Christ at a time, in the 1920s, when Mexico's government was persecuting the Church.

We should know their stories because their daily challenge was the daily challenge we still face—to walk with Jesus, to follow in his footsteps, to live his gospel in a culture that is hostile to religion and Christian values.

No, our country doesn't torture anybody for praying in public or going to Mass. But our culture, too, wants to get religion out of our lives. Our culture tells us that religious faith is something we're supposed to keep to ourselves, something private and personal. Our Christian faith is not

supposed to have anything to do with how we work, how we live, or how we vote or make decisions.

Think about our TV shows and movies. Do we ever see characters who have any faith? Does anybody ever pray or go to church? In fact, when religion is mentioned at all, it's usually being criticized or made fun of—as old-fashioned, or as something that's trying to take the fun out of life.

When our politicians debate issues, do they mention the gospel or the values of any religion? Hardly ever. If we talk about God, we're accused of trying to impose our religion on others. Even at Christmas time, now, it's against the law in many places to display images of the baby Jesus!

The threats our brothers and sisters faced in Mexico were out in the open. The dangers we face are harder to see. But we live in a culture that operates as if God doesn't exist, as if there are no God-given truths to guide our lives. Our culture encourages us to believe that God doesn't make any difference, that we can do just as well without him.

Being Friends with Jesus Christ

Our first and biggest challenge, my young friends, is to keep the faith in this culture. Here, we can learn valuable lessons from the Mexican martyrs.

They were able to keep the faith, and to even die for that faith, because they enjoyed *a personal friendship with Jesus Christ*. They were able to keep the faith and because they *loved his Church* as the place where we still meet Jesus on earth. One of the martyrs, Blessed Luis Padilla Gómez, had a motto: "God with me and for me!" (Ann Ball, *Faces of Holiness II*, p. 32).

That should be our motto, too, my friends! *God with me and for me!* It's true, God never leaves us alone in this world. Jesus is not a dead historical figure from the past. St. Paul said: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). He is with us here, now. Jesus wants to be our friend, our savior.

Do you have a good friendship with Jesus Christ? You must! But how? We come to know and to love Jesus by trying to live the way he did, by keeping his commandments, by going to church, by meeting him in the Eucharist, and in the Bible, and in prayer—by trying to grow in knowledge of his teaching and his way of life.

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has said: "If you cultivate friendship with Jesus, if you are diligent in receiving the sacraments, and especially the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, you will be able to become the new generation of apostles . . . capable of responding to the challenges of our times and prepared to spread the gospel far and wide" (Message for the 21st World Youth Day, February 22, 2006).

We see this in the lives of the new Mexican martyrs. They saw themselves as apostles in everything they did. Blessed Salvador Huerta Gutiérrez saw being a husband and a dad as part of his calling from God. He felt the same way about being an auto mechanic. Every day before going to his shop, he went to Mass and offered himself—all his thoughts, intentions and actions—to serve his neighbor and to give glory to God.

Each one of you, too, is called to be an apostle—to follow Christ, to spread his gospel far and wide. Each of you has a calling, a mission in this world that God has given to you and no one else. Right now, you may not know what your particular vocation is. But you should talk to God in prayer, and listen to his word in the Bible. Ask for the faith and courage to respond generously to whatever he is calling you to do.

Leaders and Apostles of the Next Generation

God is calling you. And whether he calls you to be a priest or an auto mechanic, a teacher or a mother, you are part of the new generation of apostles—the next generation of leaders in the Hispanic community, in the Church, and in our country.

Being a leader means, first of all, accepting Jesus Christ as the ruler of your life. The martyrs of Mexico all lived—and died—with these words on their lips: *Viva Cristo Rey!* To be true leaders, the living Christ must be your king. Jesus must be the Lord you follow and serve in everything you do.

Authority and power doesn't come from social rank or money. True leadership depends on your personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus told his apostles that being a leader means being a servant. The true leader isn't selfish, doesn't care about fame or power. The true leader does everything to serve God and to help our neighbors, our brothers and sisters (Mark 10:41-45).

You must train yourselves for leadership, for service, my friends. Gain the knowledge and the skills you need to serve our people. Stay close to the Church. And practice every day so that you can learn to listen for the voice of God.

God made Solomon the king of Israel when he was a very young man. And Solomon had only one request of God. He prayed: "Give your servant an understanding heart" (1 Kings 3:9). Make that your prayer, too, my friends. Tell Jesus you want to be his servant, that you want a heart to understand what he wants you to do.

Education, especially education in your faith, is so important. You know that in your home towns many young people are drifting away from the faith and the values of their parents. I'm sure you know young people who aren't interested in school, who've stopped going to church; I'm

sure you know some who are getting into all sorts of bad attitudes and behaviors, drugs and alcohol.

You need to be apostles to your peers. Don't preach to them. Lead by your example. Have a good friendship with Jesus yourself. Be good sons and daughters, good brothers and sisters, good neighbors and friends. That's how you are an apostle. That's how you lead others to Jesus. They will see your joy, your love, and they will want to get to know you. They will want to know what makes you so happy, so generous. And you will be able to tell them about Jesus.

Friendship, too, is very important to being an apostle. Form good friendships in the faith. This *encuentro* is a special place to do that. Make friends with people who also want to follow Jesus and do the things that Jesus wants us to do. Have fun, laugh, and play together. God made you to be joyful! Pray with your friends, too, read the Bible together. Encourage your friends to stay in school, to be serious about their faith and their studies, to aim high, to want to be holy.

Defending the Family and the Culture of Life

To be apostles, my friends, you also need to believe in the family. Remember, Jesus didn't just come down from heaven and start teaching. He chose to be born in the womb of his mother, Mary. He chose to have an earthly "father," Joseph. And remember, most of the time that Jesus was on earth, until he was about 30 years old, he was just living like a son—studying, working, worshipping, living with his mom and "dad." He came into this world just like each one of us did. He grew up in a home, just like us.

God was showing us something here—that the family is crucial to his plan for the world, to his plan for your life, and for mine. The family is created to be like a little church, a place where the faith is born and

nourished, where we help each other go to heaven. The family is the place where saints are made.

But our families are under attack, sisters and brothers. In a way, our culture treats the family like it treats religion. Our culture tells us that families don't really matter, that it makes no difference whether babies or old people live or die; that it makes no difference whether children grow up with their mother and their father. Instead of a culture of life, we're building a culture of death.

Everywhere in our country divorce, abortion, and birth control are legal. In some places, it's legal to help sick people kill themselves. And in more and more places, they're trying to make us believe that marriage isn't only between a man and a woman, that it isn't a sacrament, a sign from God.

As apostles and leaders, our job is to help spread the good news about God's true plan for the family. Blessed Anacleto used to say : "The family is the true unifier, energetic and vigorous, in which rests all the good of society" (Ann Ball, *Faces of Holiness II*, 21).

When we read the lives of these Mexican martyrs, we see how strong their families were. Many came from large, extended families, and when they married, they had many children, too. They knew family was the most important thing.

And something very remarkable: When they died, their families did not fall apart—they grew even stronger. Blessed Salvador, the auto mechanic, had 12 children. His brother, Blessed José Luciano Ezequiel Huerta Gutiérrez, who was also martyred, had 10 children. All 22 of those children—even though their fathers were killed, even though they were raised by single mothers—grew up to be leaders in society. They became doctors, engineers, musicians, priests and nuns.

They became leaders by God’s grace and because of their mothers. Their mothers were strong and faithful; they themselves were devoted apostles of Jesus. After Blessed Anacleto was killed, his wife, Maria, brought the children to say goodbye. She told them: “This is your father. He has died defending the faith. Promise me on his body that you will do the same when you are older if God asks” (Ann Ball, *Faces of Holiness II*, 25–26).

My sisters and brothers, we have to defend the family and the faith in this culture.

Remember always: you are not called to be only *Hispanic* leaders. Be proud of your heritage! Deepen your sense of your Hispanic identity, the traditions and customs of our ancestors! But you are *Catholics*. And “catholic” means universal. That means you can’t define yourself—*nor can you let society define you*—solely by your ethnic identity. You are called to be leaders—not only in the Hispanic community, but in every area of our culture and society.

Reclaiming the Culture for God

As Catholic leaders and as Hispanics, we must reclaim this culture for God.

We have to help our brothers and sisters to see that they need God in their lives. Do you notice the way many adults, even many young adults, are living? They lead crazy lives. Always running from one appointment to another, worrying about making more money, pursuing selfish pleasures and entertainments. They’re so busy that they have no time for God in their lives; they make their plans without him. They don’t seem to know what makes life really worth living for.

Everybody is trying to find happiness and love. But many of them are looking in the wrong places. It’s our job to help them start looking in the

right place. We need to help them see that everything they're looking for— truth, happiness, love, and beauty—can only be found in Jesus.

We also have to work to make our society more like the society that God intended.

As you all know, our country is in the midst of a historic debate on immigration, a debate that has raised many passions, strong opinions, and complicated issues. This debate, too, shows us once again that our country needs a new evangelization.

Even many of our Catholic brothers and sisters, themselves the children and grandchildren of immigrants, seem to have forgotten our Lord's teaching—that when we welcome the stranger, we welcome him, and that when we reject the stranger, we are rejecting him (Matt. 25:35,43).

As leaders and apostles, you must spread the good news of the Church's social teaching (*Ecclesia in America*, 44). We must encourage laws and policies that respect the God-given dignity of every person; the person's right to seek a better life for himself and his family; the duty we all have to share our blessings with others.

“Today It Is Your Turn”

More than three centuries ago, our Spanish-speaking ancestors first evangelized this continent. Today our Lord needs you to be the new evangelists of this continent.

Speaking to the Hispanic Catholic community in San Antonio in 1987, Pope John Paul II issued all of us a challenge: *“Today it is your turn to be evangelizers of each other and of all those whose faith is weak or who have not yet given themselves to the Lord. May you be no less zealous in evangelization and in Christian service than your forebears!”*

(Address to the Spanish–Speaking Community at Our Lady of Guadalupe Plaza, San Antonio, Sept. 13, 1987).

This is also my challenge and my prayer for you, my young friends! *Today it is your turn!* May you be courageous and upright—like Blessed Anacleto and the other saints who have given their life for Christ. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you're too young to give your life to Christ, to be his disciple.

I want to leave you today with the story of the youngest of our new Mexican martyrs, Blessed Jose Sanchez del Rio.

At 13, Blessed Jose joined the resistance movement against the government's repression of the faith. When he was captured, they tortured him, trying to get him to renounce his faith. He refused over and over again. Finally, they sheered the skin off the soles of his feet, and made him walk to the cemetery where they shot him dead.

While he was in jail, Blessed Jose wrote a very moving letter to his mother, trying to comfort her. "To die for God gives me joy," he wrote, "I send greetings to my brothers and ask them to always follow the smallest wish of God" (Joan Cruz, *Saintly Youth of Modern Times*, 118).

In Christ, you are all brothers and sisters of Blessed Jose Sanchez and Blessed Anacleto, part of the communion of saints in the Americas. *Today it is your turn*—to be saints, to be the new evangelists.

May this *encuentro* bring us closer together as friends in Christ, and inspire in us the desire to be saints, and the desire to *always follow the smallest wish of God!*

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