

**“The most blessed Eucharist contains the Church’s entire spiritual wealth,
that is, Christ Himself”**

THE HOLY FATHER’S ADDRESS ON PARISH LIFE AT OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE PLAZA IN SAN ANTONIO ON SEPTEMBER 13TH. THIS ADDRESS WAS DELIVERED IN SPANISH

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This is a moment of great joy for me. I have looked forward to this meeting with you, members of the Hispanic community of San Antonio, present here as representatives of all your Hispanic brothers and sisters in the United States. You are here too as a parish community, and through you, therefore, my words are address to every parish community throughout the United States.

I greet each one of you with love in our Lord and Redeemer Jesus Christ. I am particularly happy to speak to you in the beautiful Spanish language in this square named in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Our gathering here is a vivid reminder, in the current Marian Year, of the special place of the Mother of the Redeemer in the mystery of Christ and of the Church. It speaks to us of how dear our Blessed Mother has always been to you people of Hispanic culture, and how important she continues to be today in your lives of faith and devotion. Marian shrines and places of pilgrimage are a kind of “geography” of faith by which we seek to meet the Mother of God in order to find a strengthening of our Christian life (cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, 28). Popular devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary is rooted in sound doctrine, and authentic religious experience is appropriate and important in the lives of all Christ’s followers.

The Hispanic heritage of San Antonio and the Southwest is very important for the Church. Spanish was the language of the first evangelizers of this continent, precisely in this region. The missions here in San Antonio and throughout the Southwest are visible signs of the many years of evangelization and service carried out by the first missionaries. Their preaching of the salvation in Jesus Christ was authenticated by their own integrity of life and by the spiritual and corporal works of mercy and love which they performed. Following their example, thousands of dedicated priests, Religious, and lay people have labored to build up the Church here. Today it is your turn, in fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to build your lives on the rock of your Christian faith. 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 to your forebears!

Today I wish to speak to you about your parish, which is the place and community in which you nourish and express your Christian life. I wish to speak of the parish as the family of families, for parish life is especially related to the strengths and weaknesses and needs of the families that make it up. There are, of course, many things that could be said about parish life; today it is only possible for me to emphasize certain aspects.

It is useful to begin with a well-known passage from the New Testament which helps us to keep in mind just why the members of a Catholic parish come together in the name of

Jesus. In the *Acts of the Apostles* we read about the early Christians: “They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and prayers” (2:42). Instruction in the Faith of the Apostles, building up of a living community, the Eucharist and the other sacraments, and the life of prayer – these are essential factors of the life of every parish.

First, instruction or catechesis. Everyone needs to be instructed in the Faith. St. Paul summarizes it this way: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe unless they have heard of Him? And how can they hear unless there is someone to preach?” (*Rom.* 10:13-14). In a parish, the Faith is proclaimed and transmitted in many ways: through the liturgy, and especially the Eucharist with its appropriate homilies; through religious instruction in schools and catechetical programs; through adult religious education; through prayer groups and associations for pastoral activity; through the Catholic press.

There are two things that I wish to emphasize about transmitting the Faith. Catechesis has an objective content. We cannot invent the Faith as we go along. We must receive it *in* and *from* the universal community of faith, the Church to whom Christ Himself has entrusted a teaching office under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth. Every catechist must sincerely and reverently be able to apply to himself or herself the words of Jesus: “My doctrine is not my own, it comes from Him who sent me” (*Jn.* 7:16; cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 14). Likewise, every baptized person, precisely by reason of being baptized, has the right to receive the authentic teaching of the Church regarding doctrinal aspects of Christian life (cf. *Can.* 229; *Catechesi Tradendae*, 14).

The other point I wish to make about instruction in the Faith is that family catechesis precedes, accompanies, and enriches all other forms of catechesis (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 68). This means that the parish, in considering its catechetical programs, should give particular attention to its families. But above all it means that family itself is the first and most appropriate place for teaching the truths of the Faith, the practice of Christian virtues, and the essential values of human life.

The second aspect of parish life that is contained in the text from the *Acts of the Apostles* concerns the parish’s task of building up a living community. I have already said that every parish is a family of families. The vitality of a parish greatly depends on the spiritual vigor, commitment, and involvement of its families. The family in fact is the basic unit of society and of the Church. It is “the domestic church.” Families are those living cells which come together to form the very substance of parish life. Some are healthy and filled with the love of God which is poured forth into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (cf. *Rom.* 5:5). In some there is little energy for the life of the Spirit. Some have broken down altogether. The priests and their collaborators in a parish must try to be very close to all families in their need for pastoral care, and to provide the support and spiritual nourishment they require.

The pastoral care of families is a vast and complex field of the Church’s ministry, but it is a most urgent and pressing service. Each parish must be fully committed to it, especially in the face of so much breakdown and undermining of family life in society. I appeal to all priests – pastors, associates, and all concerned – to the permanent deacons, and to the Religious and lay leaders to do everything possible, working together, to serve the family as effectively as possible. This involves proclaiming the whole truth about marriage and

family life: the exclusive nature of conjugal love, the indissolubility of marriage, the Church's full teaching on the transmission of life and the respect due to human life from the moment of conception until natural death, the rights and duties of parents with regard to the education of their children, especially their religious and moral education, including proper sex education. Parents and family members must, moreover, be helped and sustained in their struggle to live by the sacred truths of faith. The Church must furnish families with the spiritual means of persevering in their sublime vocation and of growing in the special holiness to which Christ calls them.

Just as the parish is responsible for the family, so the family must be aware of its obligations to the parish, which is the larger family. Today, Catholic couples and families must think especially of the service which they have a duty to render to other couples and families, especially those who experience problems. This apostolate of couple to couple and family to family can be carried out in many ways: prayer, good example, formal or informal instruction or counseling, and material assistance of many sorts (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 71). I appeal to you, the Catholic families of the United States: be true families – united, reconciled, and loving; and be true Catholic families – prayerful communities living the Catholic Faith, open to the needs of others, taking part fully in the life of the parish and of the Church at large.

Another fundamental aspect of parish life is the worthy celebration of the sacraments, including sacramental marriage. This Sacrament forms the stable basis of the whole Christian community. Without it, Christ's design for human love is not fulfilled, His plan for the family is not followed. It is precisely because Christ established marriage as a Sacrament and willed it to be a sign of His own permanent and faithful love for the Church that the parish must explain to the faithful why all civil marriages, merely civil marriages, free unions, and divorces do not correspond to Christ's plan.

The sacramental life of the Church is centered above all upon the Eucharist, which celebrates and brings about the unity of the Christian community – unity with God and unity with one another. In the Mass, the Sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated throughout the centuries until Christ comes again. The Body and Blood of the Lord are given to us as our spiritual food. The parish community has no greater task or privilege than to gather, like Christ's first disciples, for "the breaking of the bread" (*Acts*. 2:42).

I now repeat especially to all parishes the invitation already addressed to the whole Church: to promote and foster public and private devotion to the Holy Eucharist also outside of Mass (cf. *Inaestimabile Donum*, 20 ff.). For, in the words of the Second Vatican Council: "The Most Blessed Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ Himself (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5).

The sacramental life of a parish extends also to the other sacraments which mark the important moments of the life of individuals and families, and of the entire parochial community. I wish to mention in particular the Sacrament of Penance and the important need for Catholics to confess their sins regularly. In recent years, many have grown neglectful of this wonderful gift by which we obtain Christ's forgiveness of our sins. The state of the Sacrament of Penance in each parish and in each local Church is a good

indicator of the authentic maturity of the faith of the priests and people. It is necessary that Catholic families instill in their members a deep love of this beautiful means of reconciliation which our heavenly Father, with the Church, and with our neighbor. Parents, more by example than by words, should encourage their children to go to Confession regularly. Parishes need to encourage families to do this; they need to support them through proper catechesis. Needless to say, priests, who are the ministers of God's grace in this Sacrament, should make certain that the Sacrament is conveniently available in its authorized forms.

Finally, I refer briefly to the life of prayer as it manifests itself within the Christian community.

This is an area in which the interaction between the family and the parish is especially clear and profound. Prayer begins in the home. The prayers that serve us well in life are often those learned at home when we were children. But prayer in the home also serves to introduce to the liturgical prayer of the whole Church, it helps all to apply the Church's prayer to everyday events and to the special moments of family's experience (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 61).

Everyone involved in parish life should be concerned to encourage and support family prayer by every means available; and families themselves should be making efforts to engage in family prayer and to integrate that prayer life of the wider ecclesial community.

I am happy to know that the number of Hispanic priests and men and women Religious is growing. But many more are needed. Young Hispanics: is Christ calling you? Hispanic families: are you willing to give your sons and daughters to the Church service? Do you ask the Lord to send laborers into His harvest? Christ needs H Hispanic laborers for the great harvest of the Hispanic community and the whole Church.

And finally, I wish to encourage all families and parishes not to be inward-looking, not to dwell on themselves. Jesus commands us to serve our neighbor, to reach out to those in need. And I ask you especially to reach out to those brothers and sisters in the Faith who have drifted away because of indifference or who have been hurt in some way. I invite all you who are unsure about the Church or who doubt that you will welcome to come home to the family of families, to come home to your parish. You belong there! It is your family in the Church, and the Church is the household of God in which there are no strangers or aliens (cf. *Eph.* 2:19).

We are gathered in front of a parish which is dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of Jesus, Mother of the Church, Mother of the Americas, and in particular of Mexico. When Jesus died on the Cross, He entrusted His Mother to His beloved disciple, John. The Gospel tells us that from that moment the disciple took her into his home (cf. *Jn.* 19:27). What better way is there for you to celebrate this Marian Year than by asking Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer into your homes! This means imitating her faith and discipleship; it means keeping her present in your family prayers, especially the family Rosary; turning to her, asking her intercession for the grace of conversion and renewal;

entrusting yourselves and your families to her maternal care.

May God bless each and every one of you.

May He bless every family and parish.

May the Blessed Virgin of Guadalupe love and protect the Hispanic people of the land.

Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe!