

*Text submitted to Origins*

**The Convocation of Catholic Leaders:  
The Joy of the Gospel in America  
Orlando, Florida**

**First Plenary Presentation  
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Dear sisters and brothers. What a wonderful time to be Catholic in the United States of America! Please join me praising the Lord by saying together a resounding amen: Amen! Yes, amen, we are here.

I want to thank our Catholic bishops and the organizers of this convocation for gathering us as church to reflect about our identity and vocation.

We came together to engage in a very important exercise of “evangelical discernment” (EG 50), as Pope Francis reminds us. We are here responding to the invitation to reflect intentionally about what it means to be missionary disciples of Jesus Christ proclaiming the joy of the Gospel in every corner of our nation.

What will Catholics a hundred years from now remember about us when they look back at the first decades of the twenty-first century? How will historians define the historical period in which you and I live? What will be our legacy? What kind of faith communities will our children and grandchildren inherit? These questions often hunt my imagination. Although we cannot control what historians of U.S. Catholicism will write in one hundred years, we can definitely give them the best stories, our stories and those of our communities. I believe that this is why we are here at this convocation: to set the course of what can be a new Catholic moment in the United States.

It is imperative that we have the best possible understanding of who we are as Catholics in the United States and the particular contexts in which we live and practice our faith. Allow me to walk with you sharing a few thoughts in this regard.

The large waves of Catholic immigrants arriving mainly from Western Europe during the nineteenth century quickly eclipsed the influence of the small Catholic settlements established during colonial times that preceded the birth of our nation. Many of these early communities were Hispanic and French.

In a period of roughly 150 years, the new Catholic immigrants built more than 20,000 parishes, more than 13,000 schools, hundreds of universities, hospitals, and massive networks of social services. Such presence eventually led to a strong political, cultural, and intellectual presence in the public square. The rapid growth of Catholicism in such a short period of time was unprecedented, actually dazzling, a true miracle considering the socio-political circumstances that these Catholic sisters and brothers had to face, including major bouts of anti-Catholic sentiment. Much of what identifies U.S. Catholicism today is the result of those years of growth defined by a strong Euro-American cultural heritage.

Toward the middle of the twentieth century, U.S. Catholicism had entered a relatively brief period of stability. Most European immigrants had settled and their U.S. born children and grandchildren were quickly embracing the “American way of life.” U.S. Catholics had been engaged in a long process of soul-searching about whether they should be more Catholic or more American. Eventually most opted for a both/end solution to the dilemma. Millions of U.S. Catholics became highly educated; many joined the middle and upper classes of our society. A large number of ethnic churches that welcomed immigrants from many parts of the world and served as oases to support faith and culture, eventually transitioned to serve wider bodies of Catholics in English; some of these churches ceased to exist as their mission ended.

If the history of U.S. Catholicism had stopped at this particular moment, we could offer this communal experience as a perfect case study of the American Dream achieved. Yet, history moves along. Some important changes were in store.

Before we move on, we need to understand that not all U.S. Catholics participated of this upward movement nor benefitted from the wealth of resources that Euro-American Catholic communities were creating. African-American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American Catholics largely remained in the peripheries of church and society. We cannot naively ignore the fact that socio-cultural prejudices such as racism and classism have done major harm to millions of our own Catholic sisters and brothers. Millions of Euro-American Catholics in rural areas of the country were caught up in a cycle of poverty and marginalization and were practically forgotten as the major centers of Catholic life, particularly in the urban settings of the Northeast and Midwest thrived.

Ironically, it is these communities that inhabited the peripheries of church and society... the voices that for long were not heard... the faces that remained invisible... that are bringing new life to our faith communities and renewing the entire U.S. Catholic experience. Let me say more about this.

For the last five decades, U.S. Catholicism has been experiencing the largest demographic and cultural transformation since the time of the large migrations from Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hispanics account for 71 percent of the growth of the Catholic population in the United States since 1960. Approximately 60% of all Catholics younger than 18 are Hispanic. The fastest-growing group in the Church in this country is Asians Catholics. Hundreds of thousands of Catholics from Africa and the Caribbean have made the U.S. their home.

Millions of the new Catholic faces are immigrants. They bring the best of their faith and cultures to enrich our faith communities and our society. About a quarter of all Catholics in this country are immigrants. They and their children embody the hope of a new beginning. They have much to teach us about faith and life. Immigrants are neither the enemy nor a threat; they are the face of Christ, the living Gospel that we are called to embrace with merciful love and Christian hospitality.

If we were to paint a broad picture of U.S. Catholics in the country, this is what the rough demographic portrait would look like: about 1% Native American, 4% African-American/Black, 5% Asian and Pacific Islander, 40% Hispanic, and about 50% Euro-American, White. This is a much different portrait compared to, say, half a century ago when Euro-American White Catholics constituted about 85 to 90 percent of all Catholics in the country.

Let us look around for a moment. Turn to your right. Now to your left. Based on what we just heard, do we see the faces of present-day U.S. Catholics among us? Do we see them in our faith communities? Do we see them in our diocesan offices and organizations? Do we see them in our Catholic schools, universities, and seminaries? Are we listening to their voices? Do we know their concerns? Are we reaching out? Are they still in the peripheries of our church?

The demographic transformations of U.S. Catholicism come along with some geographical shifts that we need to keep in mind. Today, more than half of Catholics in the United States live in the South and the West. The present and the future of U.S. Catholicism is being forged in geographical regions that until now were not perceived as central to the definition of U.S. Catholic life. Today they are! We live in a moment in which whatever happens in Los Angeles, Houston, Atlanta, and Miami, among many other large vibrant centers of Catholic life, will likely have significant repercussions for the rest of the Catholic community nationwide. Are we paying attention?

Of concern is the fact that the rapid growth of Catholicism in the South and the West does not match the availability of resources such as parishes, schools, universities, and pastoral centers needed to support the evangelization and leadership formation of the next generation of U.S. Catholics. We are witnessing a transition from a Catholic experience highly resourced and somewhat comfortable in terms of socio-economic positioning, to one shaped strongly by Catholics with fewer resources, less education, and emerging socio-political influence whose greatest treasures are their faith and their families. This is an excellent opportunity for us in this country to be a poor church for the poor, as Pope Francis reminds us, and an opportunity for solidarity among Catholics at all levels.

While contending with these demographic and geographical changes in our church, the last half a century has seen the emergence of major cultural patterns that are seriously impacting the practice of religion in our country. Among these, I want to mention four:

1. Family life has been significantly reconfigured in terms of roles, expectations, and practices. If the family is the first space where the new generations learn their faith and the matrix where faith and moral values are cultivated, Catholics must redouble our efforts to think

creatively how to foster vibrant family life while responding creatively, yet realistically to the challenges of being family in the United States.

2. Our society continues to witness, almost helplessly, the erosion of communal life. This has exacerbated our individualistic instincts. If communal life is not important, being with others loses meaning, advocating for others and for shared convictions is not a priority, caring about those who are most vulnerable becomes someone else's problem. From a religious perspective, worshipping together is not a priority any more. It is rather disquieting that barely one third of U.S. Catholics attend Mass on a regular basis. Even more disquieting is to know that the Catholic population has grown by about 50% in the last half a century, yet we find ourselves closing churches.
3. The so-called "culture wars" have rendered us almost unable in our society to engage in mutual and respectful dialogue. It has become impossible to speak about virtually anything because it is expected that one needs to take an ideological position to make a point... and that practically means demonizing the other who somewhat disagrees with us or does not see the world as we see it. The Gospel is not an ideology to be coopted to advance any ideological position. The Gospel is a message of life and communion.
4. Perhaps the most influential phenomenon impacting the practice of religion in our day is secularization: in 1991 about 3% of the U.S. population self-identified as non-religiously affiliated or "nones." Today, 26 years later, about 25% of all people in our country self-identify as such. The trend is very clear. We know that about 20 million people in our country who were born and raised Catholic do not self-identify as such any more. It is likely that many of them, especially those who are young, joined the ranks of the "nones." About 14 million Hispanics born and raised Catholic do not self-identify as such any more. Most of them young and U.S. born. Are they part of the previous 20 million? My sense is that most are not. We have a serious challenge. Why are they leaving? Why is organized religion, particularly Catholicism, not doing it for them? Did we know that they left? If so, where is the outrage?

What do we learn from these observations? Perhaps the best way to read these realities is through the lens of two Greek terms well known in our Christian theological tradition: *krisis* and *Kairos*.

*Krisis* is understood here in terms of transition. It is the liminal space in between *what is passing* and *what is coming*. There is no doubt that some ways of being U.S. Catholic are closing their cycle. For them we are grateful. It is fine that some Catholics feel puzzled when wrestling with diversity and pluralism, disconcerted because of a sense of loss, confused when the future does not seem as clearly defined and stable as we thought it could be —yet neither is our present. This is where we all must exercise the pastoral practice of mutual accompaniment. It would be naïve to seek a return to an idealized past, except to draw some inspiration and lessons for the future. There is no doubt that we are at the dawn of a fresher way of being Catholic in this country. At the forefront of this dawn are our young Catholic people —the majority Hispanic— with their hopes and the thirst to be church; the immigrants who bring renewed life and energy to our faith communities; the women and the men of all cultures and ages who are willing to look forward by serving as bridges to heal divides and the effects of prejudice in any of its expressions.

Yes, something new is emerging, a new time, a moment of grace, a *kairós*. We have the certainty that God walks with us and guides us with the Holy Spirit. In this *kairós* we are called to renew

the invitation to proclaim the joy of the Gospel in every corner of our nation. To echo the words of the prophet Ezekiel, God has called us from among the nations, and gathered us from all the lands to be God's faithful people (Cf. Ez 36:24-28). This is a time for Catholics in the United States not only to embrace the call to being missionary disciples, but also to declare ourselves in a permanent state of mission. Let me repeat: we must declare ourselves in a permanent state of mission. We must see ourselves permanently engaged in missionary activity, going forth (*en salida*, as Pope Francis says in Spanish), taking the initiative, going to the peripheries, embracing Jesus Christ in those who are vulnerable and most in need, reaching out to those who has drifted away, accompanying and strengthening families, advocating for life in all its expressions, caring for the created order... Hundreds of thousands of Hispanic Catholics and others are modeling this commitment presently engaged in a three-year process called the Fifth National Encuentro of Hispanic/Latino Ministry. This process of evangelization is not just for Hispanics but also for the entire Church in our country. I invite you to join the process of the Fifth Encuentro and make it your own.

When historians a hundred years from now look back at Catholics in the United States in the second decade of the twenty-first century, we should be remembered as a generation of baptized women and men, disciples of Jesus Christ, who decided to build upon the foundations left by the previous generations, embraced the gifts of every Catholic person in our communities —without exception— and accepted to be a true evangelizing community committed to building a better society for our children and future generations of Catholics. This is our legacy.

What a wonderful time to be Catholic in the United States of America! Please join me once again praising the Lord by saying together a resounding amen: Amen! Thank you.