

To Be Leaders for a New Latino Generation

Address to the Catholic Latino Leaders Conference

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It's great to be back in Denver again! I am thankful every day for the time our Lord allowed me to spend here with you and my dear brother and friend, Archbishop Chaput.

I remember when I first came to Denver. People were very kind and they gave me books to read about the history of the Church here and in the Southwest. I was especially inspired by the stories of the two heroic missionary bishops—Archbishop Lamy of Santa Fe and his good friend Joseph Machebeuf, the first bishop of Denver.

I was thinking about them as I was thinking about what to talk to you about today. Machebeuf and Lamy went to seminary together in France. They shared a great dream of crossing the ocean and evangelizing this country, especially the “wild West.”

And so they did. From Ohio to Santa Fe to Denver, and many points in between. These missionary priests were tough characters. They had to be. They faced shipwreck, diseases, and a lot of hostility and hardship. They had to confront the Apaches, and all sorts of rough folks—gunfighters, gamblers, rustlers, claim-jumpers—all of whom were opposed to the values of the gospel.

A lot of times, Machebeuf and Lamy had to defend themselves. They got pretty good at it. There's a story about Machebeuf when he went to visit Cañon City. The priest there came out to meet him. He was a tough old Irish priest and he came out with one fist clenched and holding a pistol in his other hand. Machebeuf didn't blink an eye, they say. As for me, I'm glad they don't come out to greet bishops like that anymore!

One thing I've always thought was remarkable about Bishop Machebeuf. He was from the Old World, a Frenchman. And yet he came to this country and he developed a great love for our Hispanic people. As you all know, despite what we hear these days on talk radio and on the cable channels, Mexicans have always been a big part of this country, even back then, in the mid-19th century.

Bishop Machebeuf fought for our people. He knew that Mexicans were discriminated against and treated badly, even by their fellow Catholics. In one sermon, Machebeuf criticized his Anglo brothers and sisters. He said: "You never have a good word for the Mexicans, and you seem to despise them as an inferior race of people!"

Unfortunately friends, Bishop Machebeuf's words still apply today. Not only in Denver but all across the country.

Friends, we come together today at a time when our nation is in the middle of a debate over the new Hispanic presence in America. In this debate, unfortunately, we've heard lots of angry, fearful, and vindictive talk. This debate has stirred in me many deep feelings, as I'm both an American citizen and a proud immigrant, born and raised in Mexico.

I mention the immigration debate because it reminds us of the big picture. We're here to talk about our future. The future of Latino Catholic leadership in American business and in American public life. However, much of our national conversation is still mired in the worst attitudes of the past.

We have to make a way forward for our people. We have to lead. As we do, we have to be very much aware of the general distrust and anger for Hispanics that's out there. This is all very sad and unfortunate. However, it is the reality we must confront.

Remembering Who We Are

Something worries me, my friends. All the anti-Hispanic sentiment puts hidden pressures on us. Even for those of us who have been in this country our whole lives or for many years. We might be tempted on some level to feel that somehow we must prove that we are real Americans. True Americans. We might feel subtle pressures to blend in, to assimilate. To downplay our heritage and our distinctive identities as Catholics and Hispanics.

That's what I'm warning you against today, my friends. I believe that in God's plan, the new Hispanic presence is for the purpose of our country's spiritual renewal. To restore the promise of America's youth. The noble ideals of our country's beginnings. In this renewed encounter with Hispanic faith and culture, I believe God wants America to rediscover values it has lost sight of—the importance of religion, family, friendship, community, and the culture of life.

So I urge you friends: Do not forget where you came from or who you are! Do not forget Jesus. Do not forget the Church. You need to celebrate your identity and your heritage. Not run away from it or hide it. You are Latino leaders for a reason. God's reasons. To help lead the spiritual rejuvenation of America. Through your work, your personal witness, and your faith.

Staying true to this task isn't going to be easy. The American dream, in its most materialistic and secular form, is very powerful and very seductive today.

I'm reminded again of something Bishop Machebeuf once said. This was in a letter he wrote in 1876: "On Saturday and Sunday, I am a priest and bishop to confess, preach, and officiate. On Monday and the rest of the week I am a banker, contractor, architect, mason, collector . . . a little bit of everything. [This] exactly describes my position in Colorado. . . . I wonder I am not sick, but I have not the time. A real American has no time to be sick. No time to eat or sleep. No time for anything except the 'go ahead.'"

I can tell you, and so can Archbishop Chaput: Things haven't changed too much for bishops! That's what it's like sometimes. But I think there's a lot more to that quote than just an insight about bishops. I know that many of you feel similar stresses. That there's no time for anything but going ahead and trying to get ahead. But I also think that Machebeuf has put his finger on another real problem with our culture—the divorce of religion from everyday life.

My friends, we live in a radically secular and materialistic culture. Our culture tells us that God is irrelevant and that religious faith and values are something we should keep to ourselves. Our culture tells us that religion is for Sundays. And the rest of the week is for business. And the two things have nothing to do with each other.

This division of faith and life is artificial and wrong. It is a very real problem in our culture. And it leads to lots of problems in the Church.

Being Good Stewards of God's Grace

A couple of weeks ago in San Antonio, we hosted a meeting of all the leaders of Hispanic Catholic ministry in the country. It was a very productive meeting. I want to share one insight from those discussions. These ministry leaders said they're concerned that there is so little participation of successful Hispanics in the life of the Church. This concerns me, too.

I think it stems from the same problem. The radical divorce of faith and life we have in this culture. Many successful Hispanics work, go to church on Sunday, they give some money to their parish, but that's it. That's all the connection they have with the work of the Church in their community.

My friends, if this describes your relationship with the Church—we need to change that. You need to become closely involved in the mission of the Church.

That doesn't mean becoming a lector or a Eucharistic minister, necessarily. Those things are good, but that's not what I mean. Nor do I mean, necessarily, giving more money to the Church or to different ministries. Although that is good, too, and really needed.

No. What I'm talking about is more closely identifying yourself as Catholic. As a vital member of the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church founded by Jesus Christ.

“The Church is God's family in the world,” Pope Benedict has said (*Deus Caritas Est.*, 25). You are sons and daughters in that family of God. More than that, you are elder sons and daughters. The Father has given you many graces and talents to become accomplished, successful leaders in the world. And to those whom much has been given, much is required (Luke 12:48).

Our family needs you. Our Church and our people. What I'm talking about is a sense of stewardship. A sense of responsibility. Responsibility for the mission of the Church. Responsibility for the social needs of our people and the wider society. Everything we talk about in terms of the future of Latino leadership depends first on developing this sense of stewardship.

St. Paul once asked: “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7). We have to ask ourselves that same question, my friends. Sure, we work hard. We are creative. We make sacrifices. That brings us success. But where do we get our talents from? Where do we get the materials we need to work with? Where do our own lives come from?

You know the right answers to these questions. Everything is a gift from God! We live, my friends, because God has given us the gift of life! And we are able to work, to create, to lead—because God has given us the talents to do these things. So we should give thanks to God always! For everything. First and foremost for his precious gift of life.

But how do we do that? First with our hearts and with our lips. We should thank him every day many times for the good things we have been given. But we also need to give thanks to God through service. Through works of mercy and love. We need to use the gifts that God has given us—our talents and expertise, our wealth, our time—to serve our people and our Church.

Our Lord often told parables about this. You remember this one: There was a rich man, a big farmer, and he had a great year. His land gave him a tremendous harvest. He had so much he didn’t know what to do with all his abundance. So he built big barns and buildings to hold all his grain and his other things. And he was very happy. His future looked bright. In the gospel, he says to himself: “I have laid up ample goods for many years. So I can eat, drink, and be merry.”

You know what happens next. That very night, the Lord comes for his soul. And what happens to his goods? All that he has worked for will go to someone else or be wasted (Luke 12:15–21).

My friends, we all know what this story means. We know the old saying: “You can’t take it with you when you go.” But we have a hard time living out what that means.

It is true what Jesus says: “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). That doesn’t mean that possessions, hard work and success, are wrong. No. There are many paths to holiness. There are many ways to follow Jesus in this world. It is not wealth and success that keeps anybody from the kingdom of God. It is selfishness and excess. It is the failure to be good stewards of God’s gifts.

If God has given you wealth and success, it is for a reason. It is because he needs your gifts, your service to his family, the Church.

What I’m asking you today, my friends, is important for our future. We have accomplished many things in a few short years. But I believe our Lord is calling us to something more. Something higher. We need to grow. We need our influence to spread. The good seeds we’ve sown here in Denver must be sown throughout our country. We need to build a national network of Latino American leaders.

You are being called by Christ to be the leaders of a new generation of Latino Catholics in America. A generation of virtuous men and women. Successful in their fields. Active in their communities and leaders in our political life. A generation seeking holiness in their lives and friendship with Jesus Christ. To make this happen we need a national organization.

But more than that we need conversion. We need to believe the gospel and we need to live it. We need a new formation of our hearts. To open our hearts more fully to Christ and to his love.

The family of God, your family, needs you. Our people need you. More than you probably realize.

Sariyah and Sebastian

I want to tell you about something I experienced earlier this year. On a very rainy day in March, I celebrated the saddest funeral Mass I've ever had to say.

Sariyah Garcia was 14 months old. Her brother, Sebastian Lopez, was 4 months old. Their bodies had been found wrapped in trash bags and stuffed under their mother's house. They lived in a poor, largely Latino area in San Antonio. Their mother, who is 19, later confessed that she had killed Sariyah, beat her to death, on Christmas Eve. Little Sebastian she killed a month or so later.

As I've prayed and reflected on that day, I've come to see that this tragedy is a sign of a dark moral and spiritual poverty that has crept over our people.

My friends, do you know that Hispanics have the highest unwed birthrate among any group in our country? Almost half of all Hispanic babies—45 percent—are born to unwed mothers. Just like Sariyah and Sebastian. Do you know that for every 100 children born in our community, another 23 are killed by abortion?

And what about our young people who are dropping out of high school? The government says that almost 30 percent of Hispanics aged 16 to 24 are drop-outs. What does that mean for their future? What does it mean for the future of our people?

Our people are suffering. Many have lost their moral compass. They are living as if God doesn't exist. They are following all kinds of false illusions of happiness—in drugs, alcohol, sex, violence, and crime.

There are other signs, too. The Pew Foundation this year issued a report that found many of our brothers and sisters are leaving the Catholic faith for Protestant denominations. Many others are leaving the Church to practice "no religion" at all.

This is why our people need you, my friends. They need you to be leaders. To be examples and role models. To show them the way to live a faithful life in this culture.

Five Priorities of the U.S. Bishops

So where do we go from here? How are you to lead? My prayer is that you will begin today to see yourselves as full partners in the work of the Church. The work of evangelization and holiness.

The U.S. bishops have set out five priorities for the Church, for all Catholics, during the years ahead. Before I leave you today, I want to briefly introduce you to these priorities and suggest some ways that you can promote them in your private life and in your work and volunteer efforts.

The bishops' first goal is to restore and promote the sanctity of marriage and family. From the statistics I've just shared with you, I think we can all agree that this is a crucial need in our community.

How can you serve this goal? First by being good husband and wives. Good fathers and mothers. Good sons and daughters. Lead by example. Make sure that you have family-friendly policies in your workplaces.

Volunteer to be a mentor to young people in your community. Help teach them the personal and social virtues they need to find true happiness and love.

And make sure that you are active in opposing the many forces in our society that demean and undermine the family. That seek to change the definition of marriage or parenthood.

The bishops' second goal is to educate and form people in the faith and in the faithful celebration of the sacraments.

Our people don't know the truths of their religion. That's not like failing to know math or science. It means they don't know Jesus Christ. And if they don't know Jesus Christ, they don't know the way to life.

Teaching the faith is not only a job for bishops and priests. People learn by example. You can be teachers of the faith by your example. This, I believe, is one of your most important duties. To know your faith and to live it.

My friends, don't be intimidated by the truths of our faith. They are a gift from God. Let these truths touch your heart and change your life.

Do you own copies of the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church? You should. If you spend a few minutes each day reading these books and also reading from the gospel, you will notice a change. You will look at the world and your own lives with new eyes.

The bishops' third goal is the promotion of priestly and religious vocations.

The future of the Church depends on the priesthood. The Eucharist is the heart of the Church. The Eucharist is Jesus, the presence of the living God among us.

Blessed Mother Teresa, whose feast day we celebrated earlier this week, used to say "No priest, no Jesus." She's right. For the Eucharist we need priests.

So how can you help? First, in your families and communities. Raise your children well. Help them to grow up strong and with good discipline and values. Show respect for your clergy. Pray for your priests and pray for vocations. Hold up the priesthood and the religious life to your children and others as a great way to live and to serve Jesus Christ.

The fourth goal of the bishops is to promote the life and dignity of the human person. Again, this is an obvious need in our community where abortion rates are so high.

We're beginning an election year. We read how everywhere the candidates are courting the "Hispanic vote." This is a good sign of our people's growing influence and importance. We must make sure that our influence is for the good. For Christ.

You must make candidates for local and national office understand how crucial it is to defend life. This isn't about political parties or individual candidates. It's about being faithful to Jesus Christ. Our Lord came among us as an unborn child in the womb. We must remember that. And should pray about what that means.

Practically speaking, too, we must realize that if a candidate won't defend the most defenseless among us, then we can't count on that candidate to defend the poor, the immigrant, and others who need protecting in our society.

Finally, the bishops identify as their fifth goal, the promotion of cultural diversity and Hispanic ministry "in the spirit of Encuentro." We've already talked about this. You need to be involved in your local parishes. You need to offer your talents and services, to your local bishop. Ask what you can do to help.

The Spirit of Encuentro

Underlying every one of the bishops' goals is this concern for "Encuentro." For the encounter with Jesus Christ.

In the presentation I mentioned earlier for the Convocation of the National Catholic Council for Hispanic Ministry (NCCHM), I said that Blessed Mother Teresa was in the news a lot in the past weeks. It's always a great thing to see a saint on the cover of Time magazine! It's

almost been ten years since she died. I remember the story about when she came to Nezahualcóyotl, Mexico. She was talking to the very poor people there. People living in the worst conditions. She asked them what their greatest need was. One man spoke for all the rest. He said: La Palabra de Dios.

Our people are hungry for the Word of God. La Palabra de Dios. They want the word of truth.

Our people do not want or need a Jesus who looks like them. We need the true Jesus who calls each one of us to become like him. The Jesus we meet in the pages of sacred Scripture. The Jesus we meet personally in prayer and in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance.

The true Jesus alone can set our people free from all that holds them in bondage—from sin, from selfishness, from death. From all the structures of sin that keep us from building a more Christian society, a society based on the ethical principles of our religion.

This is the Jesus who calls us to follow him. To be his disciples. To be missionaries. This is what our ministries should be all about. Being disciples and being missionaries.

Jesus calls us to be saints, my friends. I hope you will see it as your life's goal to become a saint. That's what it means to be a disciple.

I hope you will see it as the goal of your life to help our people become saints, too. That's what it means to be a missionary.

Our Turn To Be Evangelists

My friends, it's a privilege to come back to Denver again and talk to you about our future.

When I go home, next week we'll be celebrating the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's historic visit to San Antonio, on September 13, 1987.

One of the addresses he made in San Antonio was to our Hispanic community. It was the only time during his 1987 pilgrimage that he spoke to Hispanics directly. He greeted us as representatives of all our Hispanic brothers and sisters in the United States.

That day, the Holy Father set before the Latino community the challenge to be saints and missionaries. These are duties for every Christian. But this has special meaning for Latinos. For we are all the spiritual children of the Spanish-speaking missionaries who first evangelized this continent and this nation.

I want to leave you with this thought, my friends. The faith was first proclaimed in this country in the Spanish tongue. Hispanic saints brought the faith to this land. And Hispanic saints are needed to preserve that faith and to make it thrive. So strive for holiness. Strive to be saints.

Remember who you are. You are the children of saints and martyrs. Because of their heroic sacrifices, the faith has been passed on to us.

I leave you with the story of one of these heroes of the faith. Venerable Maria de la Luz Camacho. She lived in Mexico City during the atheist persecutions of the Church in the 1920s and 1930s. She was a very talented and beautiful laywoman. When the communists came to her neighborhood to burn the church down, she stood in front of the door and blocked their way. They shot her dead. But their plans to destroy the church were foiled.

Maria used to say that God would always give her the grace to be faithful to him. We have to pray for that grace, too, my friends. And we are called to be like Maria Camacho. Defending our people against the forces that would threaten their Catholic identity and faith.

You are not being asked to shed blood for the gospel. But you are being asked to open your hearts. To give God all that he asks of you. For the sake of the gospel.

John Paul told our Hispanic community: “Today it is your turn to be evangelizers. May you be no less zealous in evangelization and in Christian service than our forebears!”

Ahora es su turno de ser evangelizadores. No sean menos celosos en la Evangelización y en el servicio cristiano que sus antepasados!”

Today it is our turn, my friends. On this Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin, I pray that Our Lady of Guadalupe will help bring about a new birth of love and zeal in our hearts!