

Comments given to the Inaugural event of the
Catholic Association of Latino Leaders
Given in San Antonio, TX
January 16, 2008

I am honored to welcome each of you to San Antonio as we celebrate our first national event for the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders. It is my prayer that one day we will all look back on this beginning as a moment of God's grace for all people, as we embrace the responsibilities and opportunities that come with the leadership roles we share in our Latino community.

I believe that San Antonio is the perfect place to begin this journey of faith. For more than 300 years this community has been enriched by its Latino roots, building on its proud heritage that was born in churches with names like San Juan, San Jose, Concepcion and Espada.

In 2007 we completed a jubilee year declared by Pope Benedict XVI, celebrating the 275th anniversary of the founding of San Fernando Cathedral, the oldest cathedral sanctuary in the United States. It remains the spiritual heart of San Antonio, where community leaders gather to pray for guidance in their efforts for the common good of all of our people.

We are the heirs of the work of true heroes who built the lasting foundation of faith on which we stand today. The long and distinguished line of leaders who courageously answered God's call began in 1691 when Father Damian Massanet celebrated the first Mass here on the feast of St. Anthony.

40 years later, Venerable Antonio Margil de Jesus would establish our treasured pearls of faith, the San Antonio Missions.

In 1915, to meet the shortage of priests in San Antonio, Bishop John W. Shaw began St. John Seminary in his residence. That humble beginning would become Assumption Seminary, a model of bi-lingual, multi-cultural priestly formation for the entire country.

An Office of Hispanic Ministry was established in San Antonio by Archbishop Robert Lucy,

providing setting an example for others to follow for decades to come. Of course, Archbishop Patrick Flores, my beloved predecessor, was named the first Hispanic Archbishop in the United States, who among many other achievements, helped to establish the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, which prepares people from around the world to minister to Latinos.

Today marks the continuation of the commitment of the Catholic Church to the Latino culture, and the leadership of Latinos shaping the past, present and future of the Church in the United States. Now it is our time to make a difference in the life of the Church, to bring to mainstream America the blessings of the integration of faith and culture that are a great contribution of Latinos to the culture of our nation.

I thank my dear friend, Archbishop Chaput, the members of the Executive Committee, and each of you for your willingness to serve as a national voice for Hispanic Catholics on important public issues that intersect with our Catholic values. It is our goal to not only engage in the public debate, but to have impact on the national dialogue matters and policies vital to Latinos.

Your presence here tonight is a powerful testimony to your Catholic faith and your willingness to use your God-given gifts and influence to also work toward helping our Latino brothers and sisters come to a greater appreciation of their own culture that is rooted in their Catholic heritage.

Today, more than ever, our voices must be heard. Latinos are the fastest growing segment of population in the United States and the Catholic Church. 71% of all the growth in the U.S. Catholic population since 1960 has come from the Latino community. We must be prepared to be effective witnesses of our Catholic faith.

Many of our Latino families are being separated by unmanageable and unjust immigration laws. Their hope is being diminished by poverty and they are still confronted with discrimination and mistrust.

We must be committed to lifting up our Latino brothers and sisters so that we all can share in the promise of this great country and live productive lives with dignity and hope. We must share with all men and women seeking the truth, that the Catholic Church has the answer to the deepest yearnings in their hearts. God is calling us not just to be Latino leaders. We are called to be his apostles in every culture and every area of society.

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!”*