

U.S. nuncio to Encuentro: Missionaries must first know the joy of Christ

FORT WORTH (CNA) - A missionary disciple is one who has encountered Christ personally and is then able to bring him to others, Archbishop Christophe Pierre said Thursday at the National V Encuentro.

Pierre, the apostolic nuncio to the United States, addressed approximately 3,000 Catholics of Hispanic and Latino background gathered for the summit in Grapevine, Texas, Sept. 20. The event is the culmination of four years of consultation and workshops at the parish, diocesan, and regional levels of the Church in the U.S.

This year, the National Encuentro's theme is "Discípulos Misioneros: Testigos del amor de Dios" or "Missionary Disciples: Witnesses of the love of God."

Pierre said he believes, as do Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, that one must first encounter the person of Christ before one can become a missionary.

"For (Pope Francis), the whole missionary endeavour begins with an encounter with Christ," Pierre said.

"The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus," Pierre said, quoting the beginning of Francis' 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*. "Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew."

Benedict also began his first encyclical reflecting on the personal encounter with Christ which every Christian must have, Pierre noted.

"Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction," Pierre said, quoting Benedict's 2005 encyclical *Deus caritas est*.

This joy of encountering Christ breathes life into the missionary, who is then able to go out and encounter God's people, Pierre said.

A Church filled with "missionary impulse" is one that channels her "customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures...for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation," Pierre noted, referencing *Evangelii gaudium*.

"Just as wind pushes against a sail and causes a boat to move upon the water, so too the Spirit of God pushes the whole Church to go forth into the world, attentive to the signs of the times and the needs of the people, jettisoning that which is obsolete," Pierre said.

The missionary spirit which leads to a conversion of heart must be inspired by belief in the God and the Church, Pierre added.

"We have to believe in the Church, this is important today not to forget...believe in the Church who makes Christ incarnate in the culture and among the people," he said.

This conversion of heart and a missionary spirit must happen within pastors and Church leaders as well, Pierre noted, as they listen to and learn from the different people whom they serve.

“People’s religious experiences, including those of the Latinos, are an authentic place of encounter with God,” he said. “Pastoral conversion means moving from mere conservation to a decidedly pastoral ministry. Pastoral and missionary conversion go hand in hand with a conversion of attitudes and a conversion of statues.”

A Church full of missionary spirit is one that accompanies people and remains united - in a word, a missionary Church has “synodality,” he said, something that can be seen incarnate in the mission of Encuentro.

“The Encuentro process has shown the effectiveness of synodality in the Church,” Pierre added. “Listening, speaking, participating by asking critical questions and discerning the path forward .if Communion is a sharing of the faithful in the mysteries of faith and mission of the church, synodality is a sign and fulfillment of communion.”

Another characteristic of a missionary Church is joy, Pierre said. It celebrates “even small victories in the work of evangelization” and is nourished by the Eucharist, the sacrament in which “Christ is among us, and the joy that he has won is preserved and shared.”

Finally, Pierre said, a missionary Church is one that is not afraid to go to the “peripheries”, both geographical and cultural, to encounter people and bring Christ to them.

“It is my sincere hope that as we gather for these days, we may be the church that Christ wants us to be,” Pierre concluded.

“With (Jesus) at the center of our lives, our conversations and our ministries, confident that with the Virgin of Guadalupe to accompany us and intercede for us, may we always move forward in hope, making known the joy of the Gospel.”