

Presidential Address
(Spring meeting, 2024)

Your Eminence, Cardinal Pierre,
Your Eminences,
Archbishop Lori,
Dear Brother Bishops,
Sisters and Brothers all,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today as we strive to preach the Gospel in and out of season.

Every morning I pray for the priests in the necrology of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, and the Diocese of Cleveland in which I was originally incardinated. On 6 June in the former necrology, the name of Father Ignatius Maternowski, OFM Conv. leapt off the page. He was the first priest to die eighty years ago once the allied forces had established a tiny foothold in Normandy in France.

His name reminded me of the 173,000 troops from our Country, Canada, Great Britain, and France who died in that incredible invasion and ensuing battle to pursue the liberation of France and Western Europe from Nazi tyranny. The water in the sea along the coast was red, because so many men died in the attack.

The reflection also brought to mind an 18 year old known to many of us who participated in that invasion, went to the seminary, and later served as “Economio” of the NAC, Superior of the Casa Santa Maria, and a spiritual director of both that seminary and St. Mary’s in Houston, Msgr. Charles Elmer.

Thinking further, my father came to mind. He seldom talked about the war, but he would mock Franklyn Delano Roosevelt’s promise in the “Fireside Chats” even as late as November 1941. "Now, mothers and fathers of America, I am talking to you. As I have said and will say again and again and again, your sons will not be sent into any foreign war."¹

Yet, too old to be drafted, father to two young children, and not too long after that statement, he volunteered for the US Army and served overseas as a physician. What motivated our parents and grandparents to set aside disagreements, partisan politics, and even personal advantages and comforts to serve a higher goal? Can we be catalysts for a greater national unity in our own turbulent times?

My reflections continued as I read a recent publication from the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and saw pictures of Cardinal Dolan in the Holy Land, bringing support and comfort to those besieged populations. We are anxious to see peace return to that corner of the world where our Lord walked and we join the Bishop of Rome in his earnest appeal for dialogue, an end to hostilities, and care for the innocent victims of war.

¹ FDR, November 1941.

We are so grateful for the presence and action of CRS in that troubled area and in so many other places where the active charity of the Church in the United States is made manifest. It is the generosity of the people entrusted to our pastoral care who make that activity possible and effective. In the midst of so much tension and concern, they are generous and make the presence of the Church vital to the poor, displaced, and suffering. We are committed to making effective and transparent use of the resources entrusted to us for use in the most effective way.

On Monday I met with the Nuncio in Syria and heard his earnest appeal for an end to the sanctions there that punish only the poor and not the powerful. Perhaps we can work with the Federal Government to ensure at least the arrival of humanitarian aid. I also met with Debra Tice, the mother of a Marine who, as a writer, has been held captive for twelve years. The innocent need not pay the price of the tyranny of those who rule over them. CNEWA has not forgotten Syria, even if for so much of the world the suffering there is a footnote.

Recently we were reminded of Father Thomas Hagan, an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, who returned to care for the poor and abandoned in Haiti. He is another example of the positive efforts of the Church in the United States to be mindful of our neighbors. His commitment also calls our attention to the horrible situation that reigns not far from our borders. It should never be far from our intercessory prayer and, if we can do something to contribute to a restoration of order there, let it be done.

Speaking of borders, we are also conscious of the situation of the migrants who seek a safe haven along our southern borders. The bishops in those dioceses try their best to respect the law, but also to respond to the divine law that speaks to us about care for the poor, the homeless, and the unborn. In an election year our pleas will probably fall on deaf ears, but we cannot cease in our efforts to proclaim the Gospel from the rooftops and to see if we cannot influence those in power at the very least to improve the conditions in the countries of origin so that migration is not seen as a necessity for life. We have all heard the Lord's comment: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

Bishop Alvarez, the exiled and abused Bishop of Matagalpa in Nicaragua, has written to thank all of us for our solidarity. His letter is another reminder of our concern and advocacy for our brothers and sisters nearby who suffer in the tyranny of those who want to control Church, State, and every other aspect of the lives of a people that once was free. May the Lord draw near to Nicaragua and bring solace to a suffering people.

With the same prayer we also remember our suffering brothers and sisters in Ukraine and offer them the solidarity of our prayers, our willingness to offer refuge and support, and our encouragement to the US Government and those of good will who hold dear the treasure of self-determination, respect for national borders, and the right to live in peace free from foreign invasion.

We are deeply concerned about human dignity from the moment of conception until natural death and we constantly expend our efforts to defend the unborn, serve the poor, save the environment, and promote religious freedom and the dignity of the human person.

We are grateful for the recent declaration *Dignitas Infinita* from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. There we read a clear message about many issues that plague our times. In particular, “Regarding gender theory, whose scientific coherence is the subject of considerable debate among experts, the Church recalls that human life in all its dimensions, both physical and spiritual, is a gift from God. This gift is to be accepted with gratitude and placed at the service of the good. Desiring a personal self-determination, as gender theory prescribes, apart from this fundamental truth that human life is a gift, amounts to a concession to the age-old temptation to make oneself God, entering into competition with the true God of love revealed to us in the Gospel.”²

Pope Francis has repeatedly called the various distortions of nature promoted in the notion of gender theory one of the greatest threats of our age. He has repeated the theology of creation made clear in the Book of Genesis. *Dignitas infinita* reiterates his cautions: “The dignity of the body cannot be considered inferior to that of the person as such. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expressly invites us to recognize that “the human body shares in the dignity of ‘the image of God.’”^[106] Such a truth deserves to be remembered, especially when it comes to sex change, for humans are inseparably composed of both body and soul. In this, the body serves as the living context in which the interiority of the soul unfolds and manifests itself, as it does also through the network of human relationships. Constituting the person’s being, the soul and the body both participate in the dignity that characterizes every human.^[107] Moreover, the body participates in that dignity as it is endowed with personal meanings, particularly in its sexed condition.^[108] It is in the body that each person recognizes himself or herself as generated by others, and it is through their bodies that men and women can establish a loving relationship capable of generating other persons. Teaching about the need to respect the natural order of the human person, Pope Francis affirmed that “creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift. At the same time, we are called to protect our humanity, and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created...”³

It is good that we have the opportunity to gather here and to consider the important agenda items that will occupy our time. No doubt all of us are frequently asked when the revised Liturgy of the Hours will appear. We owe a debt of gratitude to ICEL and to our Committee on Liturgy for the efforts to bring this important project to a successful conclusion. I am grateful for the steps that we will take on that path during this meeting.

We are also eager to see the final version of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the upcoming General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. It will no doubt be an opportunity to advance the notion of synodality in the Church. I am grateful to all of those who have participated in the recent listening sessions and to the parish priests who went to Roma so that the voices of those who work most closely to laity might be heard.

² Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas infinita*, 56.

³ *Ibid.*, 60.

The experience of the synod taught the participants the importance of listening to the other even as we seek to proclaim the unique Gospel of Jesus Christ. The message of truth cannot be altered, but in every age we find ways to bring it to the ears of others. That process of evangelization, a baptismal mandate, requires all hands on deck. The mandate is to make sure that the truth is proclaimed in every culture, in every land, and at every opportunity. On the flight down to Louisville I was struck by the opportunities when the flight attendant asked me my favorite babble quotation. I was perplexed and thought of the language learning program. Only after a minute or so did I realize that she was asking my favorite Bible verse.

We are eagerly preparing for the upcoming National Eucharistic Congress. Thousands have gathered to welcome and to walk with the Eucharistic Lord on the pilgrimages from the four corners of our vast land. Circumstances allowed me to hear about those who gathered last weekend in the Nation's Capital, in Denver and to the boundary between Minnesota and Wisconsin—just three points on the pilgrimage. I have no doubt of the response in other parts of the country and look forward to our gathering in Indianapolis in July. I know that we are all grateful to Bishop Cozzens, Archbishop Thompson, the committee members, and everyone else earnestly working to make this endeavor a moment of celebration, prayer, witness, and growth.

We are grateful to Pope Francis who will be represented at the Congress by Cardinal Tagle, the Pro-Prefect of the Section for the First Evangelization and New Particular Churches of the Dicastery for Evangelization. He is no stranger to the United States and is very much looking forward to his time with us.

It will be important to consider how to capitalize on the momentum of this important event which will gather so many faithful to celebrate the Lord's unique presence. The events are important, but the continued building and reaffirmation of our Eucharistic faith is even more important. To quote a homily once heard at a First Communion Mass: First Communion is important, but so is the second Communion and the one after that. In our situation, we might paraphrase and recognize the importance of the Eucharistic Congress as a catalyst for future growth and an ever-deepening appreciation of the gift we have received.

From the beaches of Normandy, I have finally arrived at next month's long-awaited Eucharistic Congress in the Hosier State. Thank you for your attention.