

*Presidential Address*

*Most Reverend José H. Gomez,*

*Archbishop of Los Angeles*

*President, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

*United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

*Baltimore, Maryland*

*November 16, 2021*

Dear brothers,

I want to personally thank Archbishop Pierre, our Apostolic Nuncio, for his remarks, and for his wise leadership as our Holy Father's representative to this country.

Brothers, this morning, I want to offer some thoughts of my own about our moment and our mission.

I have been reading American Church history, looking to our past and trying to discern the word that God might be speaking to his Church in our moment.

And I want to share a remarkable speech that I found by one of our distinguished predecessors, Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota.

As a young priest during the Civil War, he served as a chaplain in the Union Army. Throughout his ministry, he was a powerful advocate for African Americans, and for the rights of immigrants.

Archbishop Ireland believed deeply in what Reverend Martin Luther King and others have called the "American creed" — the belief expressed in our founding documents, that all men and women are created equal and endowed with sacred dignity, a transcendent destiny, and rights that must never be denied.

In 1889, Archbishop Ireland gave an address called “The Mission of Catholics in America.” He said, and I am quoting here:

*“The next century of the life of the Church in America will be what we make it. ... As we will it, so shall the story be. ... There is so much at stake for God and souls, for Church and country!  
There is so much in dependency upon our cooperation with the divine action in the world. The duty of the moment is to understand our responsibility, and to do the full work that heaven has allotted to us ... With us it will be done, without us it will not be done.”<sup>i</sup>*

Brothers, two things strike me about this address.

First, Archbishop Ireland teaches that every Catholic shares responsibility for the Church’s mission. Bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, religious and consecrated, lay men and lay women — we are all baptized to be missionaries.

Second, he understood that the Church’s purpose does not depend on forces outside the Church. It does not change with the culture, or politics, or the spirit of the age.

The Church’s mission is the same in every time and place. It is to proclaim Jesus Christ and to help every person to find him and to walk with him.

I know each one of us feels that same urgency that Archbishop Ireland felt more than a century ago. We realize that God is calling us to bring souls to Christ and build his Kingdom; to infuse our culture and society with the values of the Gospel.

The challenge we have is to understand how the Church should carry out her mission in an America that is now highly secularized.

That's the reality. The question is: what can we do about it.

What is the best way to help our people to live and work and minister as Catholics in this moment? How can we help our people to raise their children and engage with their neighbors and the culture? As a Church, how should we evangelize and go about the task of striving for justice and the renewal of our society?

Many of the differences that we see in the Church these days are rooted in the different points of view that we have over how the Church should answer these basic questions.

Coming out of this pandemic, we can point to any number of challenging signs. But there are also many signs of hope. New opportunities are opening up for the Gospel!

There is a spiritual awakening going on in America, underneath all the clouds of the pandemic, all the uncertainty about where our country is heading. People are starting to examine what they truly believe and what they value most deeply in their lives.

There is a reason for this. It is because we are living in a moment when American society seems to be losing its "story."

For most of our history, the story that gave meaning to our lives was rooted in a biblical worldview and the values of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

It was the story of the human person created in God's image and invested with an earthly vocation to build a society where people could live in freedom, with equality and dignity.

This story underwrote America's founding documents. It shaped the assumptions of our laws and institutions, it gave substance to our everyday ideals and actions.

What we see all around us now, are signs that this narrative may be breaking down. This is one of the consequences of living in a secular society. We all need God to help us to make sense of our lives, so when we try to live without God, we can become confused.

Many of our neighbors are searching. They are looking for a new story to give meaning to their lives, to tell them what they are living for and why.

But my brothers, our neighbors do not need a new story. What they need is to hear the true story — the beautiful story of Christ’s love for us, his dying and rising from the dead for us, and the hope he brings to our lives.

Archbishop Ireland talked about “*the duty of the moment.*” I believe the duty of our moment is this beautiful responsibility that we have to tell the Christian story once again to the people of our times.

With all the disruptions of the pandemic, all the social unrest of these past two years, people can now see very clearly that a world without God cannot bring them happiness and meaning.

Our brothers and sisters are searching for God, and they are willing to let themselves be found by God. I believe they are ready to listen once again to the Word of truth and the Word of life. I think there are also people in our society — those who grew up without religion — who are ready to hear the Word for the very first time.

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has been calling the Church to return to her original missionary identity. We remember his exciting words from *The Joy of the Gospel*: “*I dream of a ‘missionary option’ ... a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything!*”<sup>ii</sup>

Again and again, the Holy Father reminds us: the Church exists to evangelize. There is no other reason for the Church. To be a Christian is to be a missionary disciple. There is no other definition.

The Church's position in society has changed. We cannot count on numbers or our influence in society. None of that ever really mattered anyway. We are here to save souls. And Jesus promised us that if we seek his Kingdom first, everything we need will be given to us.

This is why the initiatives we are undertaking as a Conference of Bishops are absolutely vital. Especially our document on the Eucharistic mystery, and our pastoral plan for a Eucharistic revival.

We are all aware that salvation does not come through another Church document or program. We are only saved through the personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

But the Eucharistic revival is a missionary project. It aims to draw our people deeper into the heart of the mystery of faith, to awaken what Pope St. John Paul II called "*Eucharistic amazement*."<sup>iii</sup>

Brothers, as we know, the Eucharist is deeply personal. It is our intimate encounter with the living God who comes to be our food, to be our strength in the journey of life.

I know in my life, everything started to change, my faith really began to grow deeper, after I made the decision as a teenager to try to attend daily Mass. Maybe you have your own experiences.

As we accompany our people during this Eucharistic revival, I hope we can share our personal stories of how we discovered the friendship of Jesus and the love of God in this beautiful sacrament.

Finally, I would like to say: the Eucharist is also the gateway key to the civilization of love that we long to create. Jesus promised that he would be truly present in the sacrament of the altar — but also in the flesh and blood of our neighbors, especially those who are poor and suffering.

If we ever hope to end human indifference and social injustice, then we need to revive this sacramental awareness. In every human person we meet — from the infant in the womb to our elderly parents drawing their dying breaths — we must see the image of the living God.

Brothers, our beautiful task is to continue to tell the Catholic story, to reveal Jesus to our people — to place their hands in his hand so they can walk by his light and follow him on the path to eternity, to the love that never ends.

As Archbishop Ireland said more than a century ago, there is so much at stake in our mission, for God and souls, for Church and country. “*As we will it, so shall the story be.*”

In just a few weeks, we will celebrate the 490th anniversary of the Virgin Mary’s apparition to St. Juan Diego, which is the true founding of America.

So let us look to Our Lady of Guadalupe in this moment and entrust all our challenges to her maternal heart.

Brothers, thank you for listening, and may God bless you and your ministry.

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<sup>i</sup> “The Mission of Catholics in America,” (November 10, 1889), in *The Church and Modern Society*, 2 vols. (St. Paul, 1904–1905), 1:90.

<sup>ii</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World (November 24, 2013), 27.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (The Church and the Eucharist), Encyclical Letter (April 17, 2003), 5.