

Text of Pope Benedict XVI's remarks to U.S. bishops

WASHINGTON - Here is the Vatican text of Pope Benedict XVI's remarks to the U.S. bishops at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception:

Dear brother bishops,

It gives me great joy to greet you today, at the start of my visit to this country, and I thank Cardinal George for the gracious words he has addressed to me on your behalf. I want to thank all of you, especially the officers of the episcopal conference, for the hard work that has gone into the preparation of this visit. My grateful appreciation goes also to the staff and volunteers of the national shrine, who have welcomed us here this evening.

American Catholics are noted for their loyal devotion to the see of Peter. My pastoral visit here is an opportunity to strengthen further the bonds of communion that unite us. We began by celebrating evening prayer in this basilica dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a shrine of special significance to American Catholics, right in the heart of your capital city. Gathered in prayer with Mary, mother of Jesus, we lovingly commend to our heavenly Father the people of God in every part of the United States.

For the Catholic communities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Louisville, this is a year of particular celebration, as it marks the bicentenary of the establishment of these local churches as dioceses. I join you in giving thanks for the many graces granted to the church there during these two centuries.

As this year also marks the bicentenary of the elevation of the founding see of Baltimore to an archdiocese, it gives me an opportunity to recall with admiration and gratitude the life and ministry of John Carroll, the first bishop of Baltimore - a worthy leader of the Catholic community in your newly independent nation. His tireless efforts to spread the Gospel in the vast territory under his care laid the foundations for the ecclesial life of your country and enabled the church in America

to grow to maturity. Today the Catholic community you serve is one of the largest in the world and one of the most influential. How important it is, then, to let your light so shine before your fellow citizens and before the world “that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:16).

Many of the people to whom John Carroll and his fellow bishops were ministering two centuries ago had traveled from distant lands. The diversity of their origins is reflected in the rich variety of ecclesial life in present-day America. Brother bishops, I want to encourage you and your communities to continue to welcome the immigrants who join your ranks today, to share their joys and hopes, to support them in their sorrows and trials, and to help them flourish in their new home. This, indeed, is what your fellow countrymen have done for generations. From the beginning, they have opened their doors to the tired, the poor, the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” (cf. sonnet inscribed on the Statue of Liberty). These are the people whom America has made her own.

Of those who came to build a new life here, many were able to make good use of the resources and opportunities that they found and to attain a high level of prosperity. Indeed, the people of this country are known for their great vitality and creativity. They are also known for their generosity. After the attack on the twin towers in September 2001 and again after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 Americans displayed their readiness to come to the aid of their brothers and sisters in need.

On the international level, the contribution made by the people of America to relief and rescue operations after the tsunami of December 2004 is a further illustration of this compassion. Let me express my particular appreciation for the many forms of humanitarian assistance provided by American Catholics through Catholic Charities and other agencies. Their generosity has born fruit in the care shown to the poor and needy and in the energy that has gone into building the nationwide network of Catholic parishes, hospitals, schools and universities. All of this gives great cause for thanksgiving.

America is also a land of great faith. Your people are remarkable for their religious fervor, and they take pride in belonging to a worshipping community. They have confidence in God, and they do not hesitate to bring moral arguments rooted in

biblical faith into their public discourse. Respect for freedom of religion is deeply ingrained in the American consciousness – a fact which has contributed to this country's attraction for generations of immigrants, seeking a home where they can worship freely in accordance with their beliefs.

In this connection, I happily acknowledge the presence among you of bishops from all the venerable Eastern churches in communion with the successor of Peter, whom I greet with special joy. Dear brothers, I ask you to assure your communities of my deep affection and my continued prayers, both for them and for the many brothers and sisters who remain in their land of origin. Your presence here is a reminder of the courageous witness to Christ of so many members of your communities, often amid suffering, in their respective homelands. It is also a great enrichment of the ecclesial life of America, giving vivid expression to the church's catholicity and the variety of her liturgical and spiritual traditions.

It is in this fertile soil, nourished from so many different sources, that all of you, brother bishops, are called to sow the seeds of the Gospel today. This leads me to ask how in the 21st century a bishop can best fulfill the call to "make all things new in Christ, our hope"? How can he lead his people to "an encounter with the living God," the source of that life-transforming hope of which the Gospel speaks (cf. "Spe Salvi," 4)? Perhaps he needs to begin by clearing away some of the barriers to such an encounter.

While it is true that this country is marked by a genuinely religious spirit, the subtle influence of secularism can nevertheless color the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior. Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs? Is it consistent for practicing Catholics to ignore or exploit the poor and the marginalized, to promote sexual behavior contrary to Catholic moral teaching or to adopt positions that contradict the right to life of every human being from conception to natural death?

Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel.

For an affluent society, a further obstacle to an encounter with the living God lies in the subtle influence of materialism, which can all too easily focus the attention on the hundredfold, which God promises now in this time, at the expense of the eternal life which he promises in the age to come (cf. Mk 10:30). People today need to be reminded of the ultimate purpose of their lives. They need to recognize that implanted within them is a deep thirst for God. They need to be given opportunities to drink from the wells of his infinite love.

It is easy to be entranced by the almost unlimited possibilities that science and technology place before us; it is easy to make the mistake of thinking we can obtain by our own efforts the fulfillment of our deepest needs. This is an illusion. Without God, who alone bestows upon us what we by ourselves cannot attain (cf. "Spe Salvi," 31), our lives are ultimately empty.

People need to be constantly reminded to cultivate a relationship with him who came that we might have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10). The goal of all our pastoral and catechetical work, the object of our preaching and the focus of our sacramental ministry should be to help people establish and nurture that living relationship with "Christ Jesus, our hope" (1 Tm 1:1).

In a society which values personal freedom and autonomy, it is easy to lose sight of our dependence on others as well as the responsibilities that we bear toward them. This emphasis on individualism has even affected the church (cf. "Spe Salvi," 13-15), giving rise to a form of piety which sometimes emphasizes our private relationship with God at the expense of our calling to be members of a redeemed community. Yet from the beginning God saw that "it is not good for man to be alone" (Gn 2:18). We were created as social beings who find fulfillment only in love – for God and for our neighbor. If we are truly to gaze upon him who is the source of our joy, we need to do so as members of the people of God (cf. "Spe Salvi," 14). If this seems countercultural, that is simply further evidence of the urgent need for a renewed evangelization of culture.

Here in America, you are blessed with a Catholic laity of considerable cultural diversity who place their wide-ranging gifts at the service of the church and of society at large. They look to you to offer them encouragement, leadership and

direction. In an age that is saturated with information the importance of providing sound formation in the faith cannot be overstated. American Catholics have traditionally placed a high value on religious education both in schools and in the context of adult formation programs. These need to be maintained and expanded.

The many generous men and women who devote themselves to charitable activity need to be helped to renew their dedication through a “formation of the heart”: an “encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others” (“Deus Caritas Est,” 31).

At a time when advances in medical science bring new hope to many, they also give rise to previously unimagined ethical challenges. This makes it more important than ever to offer thorough formation in the church’s moral teaching to Catholics engaged in health care.

Wise guidance is needed in all these apostolates so that they may bear abundant fruit; if they are truly to promote the integral good of the human person, they too need to be made new in Christ our hope.

As preachers of the Gospel and leaders of the Catholic community, you are also called to participate in the exchange of ideas in the public square, helping to shape cultural attitudes. In a context where free speech is valued and where vigorous and honest debate is encouraged, yours is a respected voice that has much to offer to the discussion of the pressing social and moral questions of the day. By ensuring that the Gospel is clearly heard, you not only form the people of your own community, but in view of the global reach of mass communication you help to spread the message of Christian hope throughout the world.

Clearly, the church’s influence on public debate takes place on many different levels. In the United States as elsewhere, there is much current and proposed legislation that gives cause for concern from the point of view of morality, and the Catholic community, under your guidance, needs to offer a clear and united witness on such matters. Even more important, though, is the gradual opening of the minds and hearts of the wider community to moral truth. Here much remains to be done.

Crucial in this regard is the role of the lay faithful to act as a “leaven” in society. Yet

it cannot be assumed that all Catholic citizens think in harmony with the church's teaching on today's key ethical questions. Once again it falls to you to ensure that the moral formation provided at every level of ecclesial life reflects the authentic teaching of the Gospel of life.

In this regard, a matter of deep concern to us all is the state of the family within society. Indeed, Cardinal George mentioned earlier that you have included the strengthening of marriage and family life among the priorities for your attention over the next few years. In this year's World Day of Peace message I spoke of the essential contribution that healthy family life makes to peace within and between nations. In the family home we experience "some of the fundamental elements of peace: justice and love between brothers and sisters, the role of authority expressed by parents, loving concern for the members who are weaker because of youth, sickness or old age, mutual help in the necessities of life, readiness to accept others and, if necessary, to forgive them" (No. 3). The family is also the primary place for evangelization, for passing on the faith, for helping young people to appreciate the importance of religious practice and Sunday observance.

How can we not be dismayed as we observe the sharp decline of the family as a basic element of church and society? Divorce and infidelity have increased, and many young men and women are choosing to postpone marriage or to forgo it altogether. To some young Catholics the sacramental bond of marriage seems scarcely distinguishable from a civil bond, or even a purely informal and open-ended arrangement to live with another person. Hence we have an alarming decrease in the number of Catholic marriages in the United States, together with an increase in cohabitation in which the Christ-like mutual self-giving of spouses, sealed by a public promise to live out the demands of an indissoluble lifelong commitment, is simply absent. In such circumstances, children are denied the secure environment that they need in order truly to flourish as human beings, and society is denied the stable building blocks which it requires if the cohesion and moral focus of the community are to be maintained.

As my predecessor Pope John Paul II taught, "The person principally responsible in the diocese for the pastoral care of the family is the bishop. ... He must devote to it personal interest, care, time, personnel and resources but above all personal support

for the families and for all those who ... assist him in the pastoral care of the family" (*"Familiaris Consortio,"* 73).

It is your task to proclaim boldly the arguments from faith and reason in favor of the institution of marriage understood as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman, open to the transmission of life. This message should resonate with people today because it is essentially an unconditional and unreserved yes to life, a yes to love and a yes to the aspirations at the heart of our common humanity as we strive to fulfill our deep yearning for intimacy with others and with the Lord.

Among the countersigns to the Gospel of life found in America and elsewhere is one that causes deep shame: the sexual abuse of minors. Many of you have spoken to me of the enormous pain that your communities have suffered when clerics have betrayed their priestly obligations and duties by such gravely immoral behavior. As you strive to eliminate this evil wherever it occurs, you may be assured of the prayerful support of God's people throughout the world. Rightly you attach priority to showing compassion and care to the victims. It is your God-given responsibility as pastors to bind up the wounds caused by every breach of trust, to foster healing, to promote reconciliation and to reach out with loving concern to those so seriously wronged.

Responding to this situation has not been easy and, as the president of your episcopal conference has indicated, it was "sometimes very badly handled." Now that the scale and gravity of the problem is more clearly understood, you have been able to adopt more focused remedial and disciplinary measures and to promote a safe environment that gives greater protection to young people. While it must be remembered that the overwhelming majority of clergy and religious in America do outstanding work in bringing the liberating message of the Gospel to the people entrusted to their care, it is vitally important that the vulnerable always be shielded from those who would cause harm. In this regard, your efforts to heal and protect are bearing great fruit not only for those directly under your pastoral care but for all of society.

If they are to achieve their full purpose, however, the policies and programs you have adopted need to be placed in a wider context. Children deserve to grow up with

a healthy understanding of sexuality and its proper place in human relationships. They should be spared the degrading manifestations and the crude manipulation of sexuality so prevalent today. They have a right to be educated in authentic moral values rooted in the dignity of the human person. This brings us back to our consideration of the centrality of the family and the need to promote the Gospel of life.

What does it mean to speak of child protection when pornography and violence can be viewed in so many homes through media widely available today? We need to reassess urgently the values underpinning society, so that a sound moral formation can be offered to young people and adults alike. All have a part to play in this task – not only parents, religious leaders, teachers and catechists but the media and entertainment industries as well. Indeed, every member of society can contribute to this moral renewal and benefit from it.

Truly caring about young people and the future of our civilization means recognizing our responsibility to promote and live by the authentic moral values which alone enable the human person to flourish. It falls to you, as pastors modeled upon Christ the good shepherd to proclaim this message loud and clear, and thus to address the sin of abuse within the wider context of sexual mores. Moreover, by acknowledging and confronting the problem when it occurs in an ecclesial setting, you can give a lead to others, since this scourge is found not only within your dioceses but in every sector of society. It calls for a determined, collective response.

Priests too need your guidance and closeness during this difficult time. They have experienced shame over what has occurred, and there are those who feel they have lost some of the trust and esteem they once enjoyed. Not a few are experiencing a closeness to Christ in his passion as they struggle to come to terms with the consequences of the crisis. The bishop, as father, brother and friend of his priests, can help them to draw spiritual fruit from this union with Christ by making them aware of the Lord's consoling presence in the midst of their suffering and by encouraging them to walk with the Lord along the path of hope (cf. "Spe Salvi," 39).

As Pope John Paul II observed six years ago, "We must be confident that this time of trial will bring a purification of the entire Catholic community," leading to "a holier

priesthood, a holier episcopate and a holier church” (April 23, 2002, address to U.S. cardinals, No. 4). There are many signs that during the intervening period such purification has indeed been taking place. Christ’s abiding presence in the midst of our suffering is gradually transforming our darkness into light: all things are indeed being made new in Christ Jesus our hope.

At this stage a vital part of your task is to strengthen relationships with your clergy, especially in those cases where tension has arisen between priests and their bishops in the wake of the crisis. It is important that you continue to show them your concern, to support them and to lead by example. In this way you will surely help them to encounter the living God and point them toward the life-transforming hope of which the Gospel speaks. If you yourselves live in a manner closely configured to Christ the good shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep, you will inspire your brother priests to rededicate themselves to the service of their flocks with Christ-like generosity.

Indeed a clearer focus upon the imitation of Christ in holiness of life is exactly what is needed in order for us to move forward. We need to rediscover the joy of living a Christ-centered life, cultivating the virtues, and immersing ourselves in prayer. When the faithful know that their pastor is a man who prays and who dedicates his life to serving them, they respond with warmth and affection which nourishes and sustains the life of the whole community.

Time spent in prayer is never wasted, however urgent the duties that press upon us from every side. Adoration of Christ Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament prolongs and intensifies the union with him that is established through the eucharistic celebration (cf. “*Sacramentum Caritatis*,” 66). Contemplation of the mysteries of the rosary releases all their saving power and it conforms, unites and consecrates us to Jesus Christ (cf. “*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*,” 11, 15). Fidelity to the Liturgy of the Hours ensures that the whole of our day is sanctified and it continually reminds us of the need to remain focused on doing God’s work however many pressures and distractions may arise from the task at hand.

Thus our devotion helps us to speak and act “in persona Christi,” to teach, govern and sanctify the faithful in the name of Jesus, to bring his reconciliation, his healing

and his love to all his beloved brothers and sisters. This radical configuration to Christ the good shepherd lies at the heart of our pastoral ministry, and if we open ourselves through prayer to the power of the Spirit, he will give us the gifts we need to carry out our daunting task so that we need never “be anxious how to speak or what to say” (Mt 10:19).

As I conclude my words to you this evening, I commend the church in your country most particularly to the maternal care and intercession of Mary Immaculate, patroness of the United States. May she who carried within her womb the hope of all the nations intercede for the people of this country, so that all may be made new in Jesus Christ her son. My dear brother bishops, I assure each of you here present of my deep friendship and my participation in your pastoral concerns. To all of you and to your clergy, religious and lay faithful I cordially impart my apostolic blessing as a pledge of joy and peace in the risen Lord.

1. The Holy Father is asked to give his assessment of the challenge of increasing secularism in public life and relativism in intellectual life and his advice on how to confront these challenges pastorally and evangelize more effectively.

I touched upon this theme briefly in my address. It strikes me as significant that here in America, unlike many places in Europe, the secular mentality has not been intrinsically opposed to religion. Within the context of the separation of church and state, American society has always been marked by a fundamental respect for religion and its public role, and if polls are to be believed, the American people are deeply religious. But it is not enough to count on this traditional religiosity and go about business as usual even as its foundations are being slowly undermined. A serious commitment to evangelization cannot prescind from a profound diagnosis of the real challenges the Gospel encounters in contemporary American culture.

Of course, what is essential is a correct understanding of the just autonomy of the secular order, an autonomy which cannot be divorced from God the Creator and his saving plan (cf. “*Gaudium et Spes*,” 36). Perhaps America’s brand of secularism poses a particular problem: It allows for professing belief in God, and respects the public role of religion and the churches, but at the same time it can subtly reduce religious belief to a lowest common denominator. Faith becomes a passive

acceptance that certain things “out there” are true but without practical relevance for everyday life.

The result is a growing separation of faith from life: living “as if God did not exist.” This is aggravated by an individualistic and eclectic approach to faith and religion: Far from a Catholic approach to “thinking with the church,” each person believes he or she has a right to pick and choose, maintaining external social bonds but without an integral, interior conversion to the law of Christ. Consequently, rather than being transformed and renewed in mind, Christians in all the parts of the world are easily tempted to conform themselves to the spirit of this age (cf. Rom 12:3).

We have seen this emerge in an acute way in the scandal given by Catholics who promote an alleged right to abortion. On a deeper level, secularism challenges the church to reaffirm and to pursue more actively her mission in and to the world. As the council made clear, the lay faithful have a particular responsibility in this regard. What is needed, I am convinced, is a greater sense of the intrinsic relationship between the Gospel and the natural law on the one hand, and on the other the pursuit of authentic human good as embodied in civil law and in personal moral decisions.

In a society that rightly values personal liberty, the church needs to promote at every level of her teaching – in catechesis, preaching, seminary and university instruction – an apologetics aimed at affirming the truth of Christian revelation, the harmony of faith and reason, and a sound understanding of freedom, seen in positive terms as a liberation both from the limitations of sin and for an authentic and fulfilling life. In a word, the Gospel has to be preached and taught as an integral way of life, offering an attractive and true answer, intellectually and practically, to real human problems. The “dictatorship of relativism,” in the end, is nothing less than a threat to genuine human freedom, which only matures in generosity and fidelity to the truth.

Much more, of course, could be said on this subject: let me conclude, though, by saying that I believe that the church in America, at this point in her history, is faced with the challenge of recapturing the Catholic vision of reality and presenting it in an engaging and imaginative way to a society which markets any number of recipes

for human fulfillment. I think in particular of our need to speak to the hearts of young people, who despite their constant exposure to messages contrary to the Gospel continue to thirst for authenticity, goodness and truth. Much remains to be done, particularly on the level of preaching and catechesis in parishes and schools, if the new evangelization is to bear fruit for the renewal of ecclesial life in America.

2. The Holy Father is asked about “a certain quiet attrition” by which Catholics are abandoning the practice of the faith sometimes by an explicit decision, but often by distancing themselves quietly and gradually from attendance at Mass and identification with the church.

Certainly, much of this has to do with the passing away of a religious culture, sometimes disparagingly referred to as a “ghetto,” which reinforced participation and identification with the church. As I just mentioned, one of the great challenges facing the church in this country is that of cultivating a Catholic identity which is based not so much on externals as on a way of thinking and acting grounded in the Gospel and enriched by the Church’s living tradition.

The issue clearly involves factors such as religious individualism and scandal. Let us go to the heart of the matter: Faith cannot survive unless it is nourished, unless it is “formed by charity” (cf. Gal 5:6). Do people today find it difficult to encounter God in our churches? Has our preaching lost its salt? Might it be that many people have forgotten or never really learned how to pray in and with the church?

Here I am not speaking of people who leave the church in search of subjective religious “experiences”; this is a pastoral issue which must be addressed on its own terms. I think we are speaking about people who have fallen by the wayside without consciously having rejected their faith in Christ, but for whatever reason have not drawn life from the liturgy, the sacraments, preaching. Yet Christian faith, as we know, is essentially ecclesial, and without a living bond to the community, the individual’s faith will never grow to maturity. Indeed, to return to the question I just discussed, the result can be a quiet apostasy.

So let me make two brief observations on the problem of “attrition” which I hope will stimulate further reflection.

First, as you know, it is becoming more and more difficult in our Western societies to speak in a meaningful way of salvation. Yet salvation – deliverance from the reality of evil, and the gift of new life and freedom in Christ – is at the heart of the Gospel. We need to discover, as I have suggested, new and engaging ways of proclaiming this message and awakening a thirst for the fulfillment which only Christ can bring. It is in the church's liturgy, and above all in the sacrament of the Eucharist, that these realities are most powerfully expressed and lived in the life of believers; perhaps we still have much to do in realizing the council's vision of the liturgy as the exercise of the common priesthood and the impetus for a fruitful apostolate in the world.

Second, we need to acknowledge with concern the almost complete eclipse of an eschatological sense in many of our traditionally Christian societies. As you know, I have pointed to this problem in the encyclical "Spe Salvi." Suffice it to say that faith and hope are not limited to this world: As theological virtues, they unite us with the Lord and draw us toward the fulfillment not only of our personal destiny but also that of all creation. Faith and hope are the inspiration and basis of our efforts to prepare for the coming of the kingdom of God.

In Christianity, there can be no room for purely private religion: Christ is the savior of the world, and, as members of his body and sharers in his prophetic, priestly and royal "munera," we cannot separate our love for him from our commitment to the building up of the church and the extension of his kingdom. To the extent that religion becomes a purely private affair, it loses its very soul.

Let me conclude by stating the obvious. The fields are still ripe for harvesting (cf. Jn 4:35); God continues to give the growth (cf. 1 Cor 3:6). We can and must believe, with the late Pope John Paul II, that God is preparing a new springtime for Christianity (cf. "Redemptoris Missio," 86). What is needed above all at this time in the history of the church in America is a renewal of that apostolic zeal which inspires her shepherds actively to seek out the lost, to bind up those who have been wounded and to bring strength to those who are languishing (cf. Ez 34:16). And this, as I have said, calls for new ways of thinking based on a sound diagnosis of today's challenges and a commitment to unity in the service of the church's mission to the present generation.

3. The Holy Father is asked to comment on the decline in vocations despite the growing numbers of the Catholic population and on the reasons for hope offered by the personal qualities and the thirst for holiness which characterize the candidates who do come forward.

Let us be quite frank: The ability to cultivate vocations to the priesthood and the religious life is a sure sign of the health of a local church. There is no room for complacency in this regard. God continues to call young people; it is up to all of us to encourage a generous and free response to that call. On the other hand, none of us can take this grace for granted.

In the Gospel, Jesus tells us to pray that the Lord of the harvest will send workers. He even admits that the workers are few in comparison with the abundance of the harvest (cf. Mt 9:37-38). Strange to say, I often think that prayer – the “*unum necessarium*” – is the one aspect of vocations work which we tend to forget or to undervalue!

Nor am I speaking only of prayer for vocations. Prayer itself, born in Catholic families, nurtured by programs of Christian formation, strengthened by the grace of the sacraments is the first means by which we come to know the Lord’s will for our lives. To the extent that we teach young people to pray, and to pray well, we will be cooperating with God’s call. Programs, plans and projects have their place; but the discernment of a vocation is above all the fruit of an intimate dialogue between the Lord and his disciples. Young people, if they know how to pray, can be trusted to know what to do with God’s call.

It has