



*“Greater America”:
The Hispanic Mission and the New Evangelization*

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My brothers and sisters, I am honored by your invitation to deliver your inaugural lecture in Hispanic ministry and theology.

I’m afraid I didn’t bring a systematic academic lecture this evening. I hope that’s ok. But I welcome this chance to share with you some of my reflections on what I see as the crucial tasks for Hispanic theology and ministry at this moment in our country’s history.

If you don’t mind, I’d like to begin by taking a detour backwards — to talk about St. Joseph and the New World.

Personally, I have always had a special devotion to St. Joseph because he is my name saint.

And it is appropriate to talk about him here at Loyola Marymount because the Jesuits were very influential in developing the devotion to him. Of course, one of your sponsoring religious orders is the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange — and if I’m not wrong, I think that when they were founded back in France in 1650, they were the first religious congregation to be dedicated to this saint.

So I hope you will not mind this little detour.

There is something beautiful and mysterious about the tradition of devotion to St. Joseph.

For most of Christian history — the first thirteen or fourteen centuries — he was a purely minor character. There were no churches named after him; relatively few sermons about him; hardly any reflections from theologians or spiritual writers. There was some private devotion but no real popular piety to speak of.¹

This remained true — roughly up until the time of the Spanish missions to the New World. Then, for some mysterious reason, this devotion begins to flower — first in the missions and then in Spain and France, spreading all over Europe.

We can say that the cult to St. Joseph and the Holy Family is the first contribution that Americans made to the theology and devotion of the universal Church. Again, I don't know why that is, but it has been a beautiful development in our Church.

One of the first churches dedicated to St. Joseph was built in Mexico City in the 1520s — and it became one of the largest churches in Christendom at that time. The church was designed by Franciscan missionaries and built with loving care by Aztec artisans. It was called the *Capilla de San José de Belén de los Naturales*. Or in English: the Chapel of St. Joseph of Bethlehem of the Natives.

The chapel opened out to a square where the Aztecs had built a 200-foot-high cross made out of thick cedar wood. People could see this cross from miles around, and tens of thousands of Indians would come for the celebration of the Holy Mass, according to accounts from the times.

This was the first permanent site of Christian worship built on the American mainland — and the first chapel ever built solely for the use of Indian converts. It has been rightly called “the cradle of Christianity in the Americas.”ⁱⁱ

Within a few years, St. Joseph was named the Patron Saint of Mexico. And throughout *Nueva España*, New Spain, devotion to St. Joseph and the Holy Family grew in original ways. There was an amazing outpouring of paintings, *retablos*, sculptures and statues, feasts, sermons and prayers.

The missionaries and their new converts seemed to sense that in the Americas, God was doing what the biblical prophets called “a new thing.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There was a utopian, millennial feeling in the air about the American missions. You find this mystical sense in the *Libro de las Profecias* (“Book of the Prophecies”) that Christopher Columbus wrote in 1502, ten years after his first voyage to the New World. Many believed the New World was part of the Age of the Holy Spirit foretold by the Franciscan mystic Joachim of Fiore.^{iv}

And in the piety and art of the missionaries and their Indian converts, you see their sense that God was making all things new in the Americas.

Joseph was portrayed as the father of the New World. He was a sign of the new humanity being born through the mission of the Catholic Church. He was the image of God in the new Garden of Eden that was America.

The Holy Family of Joseph, Jesus and Mary was portrayed as the “earthly trinity” — an icon of the heavenly Trinity and a sign that God once more was dwelling with his people in his creation. The Holy Family was the archetype of the family of God being created by the Church's mission — the first-fruits of the new civilization of love and truth being born in America.

My brothers and sisters, I recall these things for you because I really believe we need to recover the sense of wonder and mystery these first missionaries experienced.

We need to see our country and all the Americas today through *their* eyes, to remember that these lands were once seen as the “ends of the earth,” the final frontier of the Church’s universal saving mission. And we need to have our hearts inflamed with their same sense of personal duty for the salvation of souls and the coming of God’s Kingdom.

That’s what we’re really talking about when we talk about theology and pastoral ministry. We’re talking about the mission of the Church.

Because our theology and ministry are only authentic when they are placed in service to the mission that Jesus Christ entrusted to his Church. The mission of going out into all the world to preach his Gospel to the whole creation. The mission of baptizing and proclaiming forgiveness of sins in his name. The mission of teaching all people to live by what Jesus commanded.^v

Jesus didn’t give that mission only to bishops and priests and religious brothers and sisters. Every one who is baptized shares responsibility for the Church’s mission. So this is our work, too, my friends.

Pope Paul VI said that the task of evangelizing all people is the essential mission and deepest identity of the Church. “She exists to evangelize,” he said.^{vi} And what he said about the Church is true for every one of us who belongs to the Church.

Now, in order to carry out our mission of evangelization, we have to always be trying to understand what God is saying to his Church in the particular historical moment we are living in.

That’s what the Second Vatican Council meant when it said the Church has to study the “signs of the times” and interpret them in light of the Gospel.^{vii}

My brothers and sisters, I believe the great sign of our times is what our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI has called “the eclipse of the sense of God.” In part, this is the result of an aggressive project by elite groups to radically secularize and “de-Christianize” American culture — to drive God to the margins of our society and our lives.

The fact is, that after only 600 years, the faith that the missionaries brought to our lands is fading. More and more of our brothers and sisters throughout the Americas are living as if they have no need for God — as if he doesn’t even exist. And as our sense of God diminishes, we are becoming more and more a people who have lost our sense of the sanctity, meaning and purpose of human life.

America risks becoming a land that no longer knows Jesus Christ, a reality that has already happened in many of the once-Christian nations in the West.

That's why it seems to me that the new evangelization of America must be our only task for Hispanic theology and ministry — and indeed our only task for all theology and ministry in our Church.

Everything we do must be measured by what it contributes or does not contribute to proclaiming Jesus Christ to the men and women of our day. We all need to see ourselves as missionaries to the brave new world of America and the Americas.

We need that same zeal for souls that those first missionaries had. When you read their letters, it's amazing. They knew they were leaving their homes and never coming back. They were prepared to suffer any hardship to proclaim Christ.

I think of one of my favorites, the Franciscan Antonio Margil. He was ordained a priest in Spain at 24, and he left his home forever in 1683. He told his mother he was going to the New World because “millions of souls are lost for want of priests to dispel the darkness of unbelief.”

They called him the “Flying Padre” because he would walk barefoot — forty or fifty miles a day — carrying only a walking stick, his breviary and a small kit for saying Holy Mass. For more than half a century he evangelized all over the Americas. He established churches in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, Louisiana and Texas.^{viii}

We need that same energy and drive at every level of our Church today. In our ministry, in our theology, we need to always be thinking about how to make Christ real in people's lives and how to show them the path to God.

I also think our mission today requires a new spiritual and religious understanding of America's history — and a new understanding of the ways our history intersects with the first evangelization of Mexico and the other lands of the Americas, the *Nueva España*.

In his last book, written the year he died, Blessed John Paul II said: “The history of all nations is called to take its place in the history of salvation.”^{ix}

What Blessed John Paul meant is that every nation is related in some mysterious way to the mission that Christ gave to his Church. The mission of preaching salvation to all nations and creating one family of God from out of all the peoples of the earth.

We see this very clearly in American history. American exists as the product of the Christian mission.

That's not a pious wish. It is historical fact. The first "patents" issued to explore the New World all speak of Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

For instance, Lucas Vásquez de Ayllón received a patent in 1532 to explore the coast of Florida. The patent read: "The principal intent in the discovery of new lands is that the inhabitants and the natives thereof ... may be brought to understand the truth of our holy Catholic faith, that they may ... become Christians and be saved."^x

Sadly, we know that many of the colonizers came, not as Christians but as conquerors, their hearts filled with greed and sinful ambitions. Their cruelty and the suffering of their victims — generations of victims and atrocities — are well documented and condemned in our theologies and history.

I think now it is time for us in our theology and ministry to recover the deeper meaning of our history — in the true Christian spirit that animated the Church's mission to the New World. We need to study everything about this period with prayer. We need to enter into the missionary heart and soul of the Age of Discovery. We need to recover the sense of awe and possibility that inspired the first evangelization of our continents.

In our new evangelization, we need to tell the story of the "greater America." We need to help our neighbors see that there is more to our history than they think they know.^{xi}

I am convinced that one of our biggest problems today is that America has lost her national "story." We have lost the sense of who we are as a people and who we are called to be.

Part of the problem is incomplete history. We continue to teach and tell America's story as if it everything began on Plymouth Rock and culminated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

But telling our American story in this way leaves out a lot and gives us a distorted understanding — not only about American identity and culture, but also about our country's place in God's plan for the history of salvation.

We don't have time tonight to talk about those issues. But I just want to make that point. That as Hispanic Catholics, we know that America's history is much deeper, much richer. And this knowledge must inform our work of the new evangelization.

Before I came to Los Angeles, I was the Archbishop of San Antonio, as many of you know. My Cathedral See was San Fernando Cathedral, which was established in 1731. If you know your dates, you'll know that George Washington was not even born and already Catholics were worshipping there.

We also know that priests traveling with Ponce de León near southeast Florida in 1521 offered the first Mass celebrated in the present boundaries of the United States. That's almost exactly a century before William Bradford and the Mayflower arrived at Plymouth Rock.

The truth is this: America is actually the historical product of at least three very different Christian "missions" — the mission of the English Puritans and the Catholic missions of Spain and France.

That means that as Americans, we are children of both the Protestant Reformation that prevailed in places like England and also children of the Catholic renewal or the Counter-Reformation, centered in Spain and Rome.

It is true historically, that the Protestant spirit came to inform America's political, economic and cultural institutions, while Catholics for many years faced discrimination in different forms.

But today the broad Christian consensus that once underwrote the institutions and assumptions of American life has collapsed. And in the face of widespread religious indifferentism and elite disdain for religion, I believe it is more necessary than ever that we recover the spiritual legacy of our country's Catholic "founders."

So we need to know our history, my brothers and sisters. It will enlighten us, strengthen us, and inspire us. And it will help us in our evangelization of American culture.

There is something powerful in remembering that before this country had a name — long before there was a Washington or a Wall Street — the missionaries were celebrating the Mass here and preaching the Gospel in the Spanish tongue.

There is something powerful in knowing that before the Mayflower and before America's war of independence, the blood of our Hispanic Catholic martyrs was being poured out as the seed of our American Church.

So let me try to conclude and summarize my thoughts.

My first point is that the mission of the Church in our day must be the new evangelization of America. And Hispanic Catholics are called to be spiritual and moral leaders in this new evangelization.

My second point is that in this great missionary project we need to draw more deeply from the wells of the missionary experience and theology of America's "first evangelization."

We need to study and preach “the greater America” — America in light of the Christian mission to the Americas, from the top of what is now Canada to the ends of South America and across to the Caribbean.

And my final point is that I believe America needs our witness — as Hispanics and as Catholics. All of us in our Church are children of the Hispanic mission to America. And America needs our witness, now more than ever, in order to understand her national character and place in history. Especially her place in God’s plan for history. America needs our Hispanic Catholic witness for the renewal of her national soul.

To the beautiful Puritan idea of America as the “city upon a hill,” we need to propose in our evangelization a beautiful Hispanic-Catholic vision of America as *El Camino Real*, the King’s Highway.

Historically we know that the chain of missions along *El Camino Real* is part of the legacy that Blessed Junípero Serra gave us here in California. But we can see this also as a beautiful metaphor for a Hispanic-Catholic vision of mission, theology and ministry.

El Camino Real tells us that we are pilgrims in our Christian lives, immigrant missionaries along the road to our Father’s house, the Kingdom of God. Strangers with no lasting city, who know that our true home is in heaven.^{xii}

This image tells us that we are called to meet our neighbors — whoever they are and wherever we find them along the way. We are called to accompany them, to talk to them of Jesus and his salvation. To call them to conversion and communion.

This image tells us also that we are called to be a light to the world and to scatter every darkness. As the first missionaries did, in our evangelization we need to cry out and defend the sanctity of the human person and the sanctity of marriage and the family — against every form of oppression and against every pagan ideal.

As those first missionaries did, we need to commit ourselves to building a culture of charity and truth, mercy and justice. Along *El Camino Real*, people of every color, race, nationality and language must live as one holy family of God.

Blessed Junípero Serra once wrote: “Missions, my Lord! Missions! That is what this country needs! Missions will ... provide this country with what is most important — the light of the Holy Gospel.”^{xiii}

We are called to be those missionaries. We are called to once more to make America a new world.

Thank you for your kind attention this evening.

I ask the prayers of St. Joseph and Our Lady of Guadalupe. May they watch over all of you and your families and help you to be faithful in all that you do to be missionaries for a new America.

ⁱ See Joseph T. Lienhard, “St. Joseph in Early Christianity: Devotion and Theology,” in *Joseph of Nazareth through the Centuries*, ed. Joseph F. Chorprenning (St. Joseph’s University, 2011), 15–48.

ⁱⁱ See Jaime Lara, “The First Church Dedicated to St. Joseph in the New World: An Aztec-Christian Chapel in Mexico City,” in *Joseph of Nazareth through the Centuries* (St. Joseph’s University, 2010), 241–262, at 221–222; Joseph F. Chorprenning, “Icon of Family and Religious Life: The Historical Development of the Holy Family Devotion,” in *The Holy Family as Prototype of the Civilization of Love: Images from the Viceregal Americas* (St. Joseph’s University, 1996), 3–39, at 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isa. 42:9; 43:19; Jer. 31:22; Rev. 21:5.

^{iv} Lara, “First Church,” 236, n.3

^v Matt. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15.

^{vi} *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

^{vii} *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

^{viii} See José H. Gomez, *Men of Brave Heart: The Virtue of Courage in the Priestly Life* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2009), 13.

^{ix} *Memory and Identity* (Rizzoli, 2005), 72–73.

^x See Margaret and Stephen Bunson, *Faith in the Wilderness: The Story of the Catholic Indian Missions* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2000), 24–25.

^{xi} See Herbert E. Bolton, “The Epic of Greater America,” *American Historical Review*, 38:3 (1933): 448–474.

^{xii} 1 Pet. 1:1, 17; 2:11; James 1:1; Phil. 3:20; Eph. 2:12, 19; Heb. 11:13; 13:14.

^{xiii} Quoted in M. N. L. Couve de Murville, *The Man Who Founded California: The Life of Blessed Junípero Serra* (Ignatius, 2000), 99–100.