



## Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July 16 2017 A

### Report on the Convocation of Catholic Church Leaders by Ascension Parishioners

On the weekend of July 1-4, the largest gathering of Catholic Church leaders in our history took place in Orlando.

Amongst 3,000+ leaders were six Cardinals, 300 Bishops, hundreds of Clergy and Religious, and over 2,000 lay leaders who minister in chanceries, parishes, and in various lay movements. The program included:

- Daily plenary sessions for all participants which consisted of a talk, sometimes a short witness, and an interview of four panelists with expertise in a particular area.
- Three *breakout sessions* with 22 choices. (How cool would it have been if one could bilocate!)
- Daily Mass with wonderful music and homilies.
- An evening session with varying foci.

Many of the participants were invited by their local bishop. The Diocese of Orlando had about 50 delegates, four of whom were from Ascension: Deacon Chris, Laura Dodson (Press and NCCW), Patrick Neve (currently in college at Franciscan University in Steubenville), and me. I'm writing my portion of this column the day I leave for Ireland so, unfortunately, I don't have the time to coordinate my report with the other three writers.

Although the Convocation event was in the planning stages for several years before Pope Francis published his *Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel*, this publication dominated the whole Convocation. So much so that the subtitle of the event was *The Joy of the Gospel*.

#### Words, phrases heard over and over

Words and phrases that we heard over and over at the Convocation were: Jesus (he is our Leader and Enabler), 'Missionary Disciples,' 'Peripheries,' and 'Joy.' For me, a one-sentence summary of the Convocation could be: We the baptized are called to be *Missionary Disciples*, taking the *joy of the Gospel* to the *peripheries* of our society. We go forth in the name of Jesus and in the power of Jesus.

We can say "Missionary Disciples" is the new buzzword in the Catholic Church. Most of the exhibits had resources tailored to our call to be Missionary Disciples.

The term Missionary Disciples is certainly not new. In his final address to his disciples, Jesus said: "*Go forth to the ends of the earth....*" So today, our Church is simply underlining and emphasizing an ancient call. But the term is renewed for us today. Until the Pope published his *Exhortation on The Joy of the Gospel*, hardly anyone talked about our call to be Missionary Disciples.

#### "Go to the peripheries."

The second urgent call we heard over and over was to go to the peripheries of our society. Jesus did this when he reached out to the poor, the alienated, prostitutes, and sinners. His ministry mostly took place *outside* the walls of his Synagogue.

Our Door-to-Door Ministry is one attempt to go to the peripheries. Our outreach ministries are also an effort to bring God's love to those living on the edge of society. Our tithe (\$110,000 this past fiscal year) went to help our brothers and sisters on the peripheries.

#### The challenge going forth

I see that one immediate and ongoing challenge is for us to empower more and more parishioners to *see* their call to be Missionary Disciples of Jesus—ready and willing to use every opportunity to bring God's love to others.

A second call of the Convocation rooted in Pope Francis' exhortation is to be ready and willing to move outside our comfort zone and venture into the peripheries. It is good to recall that we as a Church have a long history of doing this. For example, so many religious orders were founded to take the love of Jesus to the poor, the ignorant and the forgotten. Today, organizations like the **Catholic Relief Services** is constantly bringing God's love and practical care to the peripheries of society.

The Church in its essential form is *Missionary*. The Church dies when she only focuses on herself and looks forward. We can say the same about each family and us individually. We must move beyond ourselves and see how we can share our bread with the hungry—materially and spiritually.

Finally, a personal highlight of the Convocation was a brief meeting with my namesake, Cardinal Joseph Tobin, who invited me to New Jersey for a cup of tea.

## Deacon Chris Meehan's Reflections

Crowds, liturgy, breaking bread together, love and friendship, brotherhood/sisterhood, concern for the suffering, wisdom, focus, enthusiasm and energy, fire of the Holy Spirit, liturgy, teamwork, service, lots of walking and sore feet – these are just some of my recollections as I reflect on the encounter that was Convocation of Catholic Leaders. My most memorable personal moment was serving at the altar with Knights of Columbus Supreme Chaplain Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore.

Like Jesus' call of the 12 Apostles who were then sent out to preach and evangelize the people, the ground-work for the Convocation delegates actually began well before the event itself with the call of our bishop to come forward and sign on to become part of the delegation. Each delegate was then given the task of self-

preparation by devoting time to the reading of and reflection upon Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel) as well as by taking time to reflect upon their own service in the Church and the needs of God's people whom they encounter in their service. Armed with this background, we were then called to bring those observations and understanding to the Convocation so as to relate them to the missionary call of the Gospel.

At the Convocation, the energy and enthusiasm were palpable as the delegations poured into the main ballroom for each plenary session and then, like waves breaking upon the rocks, broke apart and spilled out into the separate conference rooms to discuss further the various aspects of that particular plenary focus area. The breadth of experiences that the delegates brought to the Convocation spoke to the incredible variety of gifts within the Church but it also made it apparent how many needs there are within our country—places where the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is so greatly needed.

Each day of the Convocation carried a theme. That theme was developed by means of the speakers and their presentations as well as by the panelists in the plenary and breakout sessions. Our gathering day, Saturday, was themed Unity, followed in the next days by Renewal,

Witness, and lastly, Mission.

There were many outstanding speakers at the plenary and breakout sessions. The massive flow of information and insight offered by these wonderful presenters made me feel as though I was 'drinking from a fire hose.' Allow me to relate a few of the impactful ideas that I received.

The Keynote Speaker for the opening plenary session was Dr. Hosffman Ospino from Boston College. He asked the question, "What will be our legacy of faith?" In other words, what kind of Church are we going to leave to future generations? As he laid out for us the current demographics of the Church in the United States, he identified key aspects of the US cultural experience today.

First, family life roles and expectations are changing; secondly, there continues to be an erosion of communal life—individualism is increasing; thirdly, we now have

major cultural wars whereby mutual/respectful dialogue has ceased; lastly, secularization is increasing as today, 25% of citizens self-identify as "Nones," i.e., those with no religious affiliation. We are becoming more separated and isolated, relying on our own selves, and regarding our own selves, as the source of truth.

In his closing remarks, he posed this important question: "Do we care if the Church survives?"

"People will act for *love* what they won't do for the *law*." Therefore, if we want the Church to survive, we need to (in the words of Cardinal Wuerl) "take that Good News and live it so as to become to those we encounter an invitation to share in that life with Christ" and "...make an effort to make that an ordinary way of living."

In regards to the secularization of our country, I learned during a breakout that 70% of young adults see science and religion in conflict; 78% of them use that as a reason to not practice religion. Dr. Natasha Wilson pointed out that we need to help youth to see God within the science they love and in that way, these passionately loved subjects can lead them to God. "Science takes things apart to tell us how they work; faith puts things together to understand why they're here." "Faith and reason are the two wings to lift us to the truth." Youth are the future of the Church and we need to help them see God in all things, especially in science.

**If we want the Church to survive, we need to "take [the] Good News and live it so as to become to those we encounter an invitation to share in that life with Christ and ... make an effort to make that an ordinary way of living."  
- Cardinal Wuerl**

## Laura Dodson's Reflections

**"Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others, and this can happen unexpectedly and in any place: on the street, in a city square, during work, on a journey.**

~Evangelii Gaudium, "The Joy of the Gospel" (127)

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

A big thank you to Father Eamon – I'm so very honored to share my reflections of the Convocation and I'm so very humbled that you are reading – thank you.

The words I heard throughout the Convocation: "Listen, what do you hear?"

Most of our time was spent listening: to Scripture—the Gospel framing our thoughts and what was to come—whether in the proclamation in liturgies or by the cardinals and bishops whose homilies and presentations always brought the Gospel message into the topic at hand; to experts in their fields providing the information and understanding of the landscape where the Gospel message is most needed; to panelists—witnesses to their experiences and faith; but most especially, listening to the Gospel call within the hearts of each one of us.

And how do we know we heard?

The love, the sense of family and intimacy—no matter what the roles of the individuals: clergy, religious, laity, or the diversity—we were a beautiful tapestry of many races, languages, cultures, abilities. We sat together at meals, laughed and sometimes cried, we shared as we walked the halls. There was a unity and communion that was palpable, far beyond anything I have ever experienced.

It was in listening that we were able to be open to how the Holy Spirit was calling us to respond and we were given the opportunity to reflect—to ponder our response in the dialogue and discussions that occurred in the breakout sessions. We always broke into small groups to witness and discern—to hear the response of community to what we were experiencing and sharing—the discernment piece critical to verify that the call is truly from the Holy Spirit.

**The message was clear: as Catholics, we are called to spread the Good News—God's Love—and there has**

**been no greater time than this because it's the message the world most needs to hear.**

At the opening Mass, in his homily Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York quoted St. Mother Teresa's acronym to explain the Joy of the Gospel, "**J** is for Jesus; **O** is for Others, **Y** is for Yourself."

Our call is to keep Jesus as our focus and then listen to others to hear how we can be God's love to whomever the Lord sends, as well as how our Holy Spirit is using others to be God's love to us.

We are called to be missionary disciples to the peripheries and the periphery is as far away or as near as the next person we meet. We may be very comfortable in ourselves, but to truly live the Joy of the Gospel, we must step out of ourselves—out of our comfort zones and put Jesus and others first.

Our parish (far beyond others) is so amazing in our missionary outreach in the multiple ways we reach out to the hungry and homeless and hurting in our community and our world. As we read this, our parish is preparing to welcome and shelter homeless families for a week through Family Promise.

Still, when we are honest with ourselves, there is so very much more each of us can do and be in our families, our homes, neighborhoods. Our mission field is exactly where we are and we know our call.

"Pope Francis accompanies you," said Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the U.S., at the conclusion of the closing Mass. "Your mission is just beginning—it is always beginning. I encourage you to share what you have heard and experienced. Share especially by the witness of your lives. I have the privilege of announcing to the Holy Father how the Spirit is alive in the U.S. You are disciples filled with courageous witness to the Joy of the Gospel. The Holy Father wishes you peace and joy as you go forth on your mission."

Thanks for listening to what I heard,  
Laura

## Patrick Neve's Reflections

*At the Convocation of Catholic Leaders in Orlando, I was able to attend as a guest of Flocknote, an online service to help parishes communicate more effectively.*

In the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus calls two pairs of brothers. He calls Peter and Andrew while they cast their nets and calls James and John while they mend their nets. The brothers' activities show us two ways to evangelize: bringing in new converts and "mending the net" in which we catch them.

This Convocation of Catholic Leaders emulated James and John: they sought to begin mending the net of Christ's Church in America.

The first session I attended discussed young adults in America. Staggering statistics say that a majority of young adults leave the Church six years after confirmation, and that there are six leaving for every one convert. Without confidence in the providence of the Holy Spirit, we would be tempted to despair.

In the second session, we discussed the importance of God's *tangibility*. Here lies the source of the problem mentioned in the first session. This feeling of God being unreachable leads young people to leave the Church. God is not impersonal. His Kingship is tangible, and He gives us a tangible example in our earthly father.

However, many young people have grown up in a broken home where a tangible father or mother is a fairy tale. Where the earthly family has failed them, God gives them a spiritual family: us.

The answer to the statistics—how we mend our nets—is through a return to our baptism. In baptism, we are born from above [John 3:3] into God's family. We become brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers to each other. We become a visible, tangible sign of the family that is the Kingdom of God.

Before his conversion, Church father Tertullian noted about the early Christians, "How they love one another!" The love was familial love. An understanding that nothing their brother could do would make them not their brother. In the midst of cliques and inevitable church politics, they understood: this is my brother, my sister, my mother, my father.

If our mission is love and mercy, as the car magnets say, this is how we are being called to live it out. To whomever you find next to you in the parish, be their brother, mother, or son.

Christians are family. This is LITERAL, not metaphorical. I fight with my brother all the time but I would never gossip about him, for example. If anyone ever did, I would correct him immediately. I love my brother and I need to love all of my Christian brothers and sisters that way.

The truth of our divine relation is manifest in three types of relationships. Everyone should seek these out and be ready to fulfill each role.

- **Brother/Sister:** Accountability partners that keep each other honest and direct on their walk.
- **Father/Mother:** Mentorships/spiritual direction from an experienced Christian to a younger one.
- **Family:** Small groups within the parish community. These groups should be tight-knit, BUT also open enough to accept other members

At the Convocation, Bishop Robert Barron warned against watering down truth, so I will not: If you do not live these relationships, you are not living your faith. The walk with Christ is not a solitary, weekly deal. It permeates into our everyday life, and into our relationships.



"Cousin Joe (Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin) and me" at the Convocation

Have a blessed week,

*Fr. Barron*