

**Opening Address  
Call to Action Conference**

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Chairman, NCCB Ad Hoc Committee for the Bicentennial  
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The journey to this day and this place has been long. You have come to Detroit in October of the bicentennial year, ten years after Pope Paul VI issued his "Call to Action" urging us to take up the cause of justice in the world, and two years after our own bishops summoned us to consider our responsibilities for the preservation and extension of the national promise of "liberty and justice for all." We are here to participate in an extraordinary assembly of the American Catholic community. This assembly has been convened to respond to the needs of our people as these have been revealed through two years of discussions, hearings and reflection. All of us are here to assist the American Catholic community to translate its sincere commitment to liberty and justice into concrete programs of action designed to make those ideals a living reality in Church and society. We will do all this in a setting of prayerful reflection on the call of the Holy Spirit. Our central preoccupation here should be how we can more authentically as a Christian community live our faith in God and His Son, bearing witness to our confidence in Him and our awareness of His image in every person, and, together as a Church and individually as workers, citizens and Church members, serve the cause of justice and human development.

Never before has there been an attempt to bring together in this way representatives of the whole ecclesial community of the United States: bishops, priests, religious, and laity. Yet this extraordinary assembly is not a radical departure from our traditions. Our first bishop, John Carroll, initiated a policy of practical collegiality among the American hierarchy which resulted in seven provincial and three plenary councils of Baltimore between 1829 and 1884. In these meetings, the bishops and archbishops of the country, working closely with the Roman authorities, legislated for the Church in America. The hierarchy cooperated to insure that, despite the rapid expansion of the nation across the continent and the even more rapid growth of the Catholic people from the polyglot nationalities of Europe, the American Church would remain one in spirit, practice and discipline. In the latter part of the century, in 1889 and 1893, national assemblies of the laity met to discuss what role the lay people of the Church could play in spreading the Gospel and providing a fuller and freer life for all Americans. The enthusiasm spurred by these meetings did not last. Later efforts to bring about unity through federal of hundreds of lay organizations met with only modest success. Yet there was a tradition of fostering regional, sectional, and ethnic diversity, and out of it to form a unified Church which could communicate among the groups and regions, and lead to mutual enrichment and provide a basis for united action.

Our efforts at renewal require both an affirmation of our rich pluralism and a strong national organization, and both must take account of the pressing needs of our own

people and the people of our country and our world. To forward these objectives, the American Catholic bishops decided to dedicate the Church's bicentennial celebration to the theme of justice. With the help of many people, we formulated a unique plan: we would hold a series of regional hearings, where teams of bishops would sit and listen to the concerns of our people on issues of justice in the Church and in the world. These hearings were a marvelous experience. At each of the hearings—held in six different cities: Washington, San Antonio, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Sacramento and Newark—we heard clearly the cries of the people for a chance to raise their families in peace and dignity, pass on their distinctive cultural traditions to their children, find a responsible government and a responsive Church. Later, in a special hearing at Maryknoll, New York, we heard a number of invited guests from around the world tell us of the issues of human rights, economic justice and human survival in nations struggling for development and liberation. The hearings were an exhilarating and challenging experience for all who took part.

People today, rich and poor, are often studied by scholars and pollsters; their needs, hopes and concerns are defined by questionnaires or by computers. Only rarely are they asked directly to speak up and be heard; so rarely, in fact, that many greet the invitation with understandable skepticism. Yet, that is what we have tried to do, in our perhaps inefficient way. We are left with an enormous sense of responsibility, and an equally strong feeling that there is great power in the spirit and faith of the people who appeared before us. The human resources of our Church and our nation are vast; our task is to carry forward, today, together, the work that has been begun—to unlock the structures of Church and world so that the spirit and energy of our people can flourish and contribute to renewing our communities. No one who sat through those 21 days of hearings could doubt that it can be done and that it must be done.

The regional hearings presented a model of listening, learning, and caring Church. We hoped that the model would be reproduced in parishes and dioceses around the country. And we were right. More than half the nation's dioceses sponsored parish discussions. These and other dioceses held their own regional and diocesan-wide meetings to hear the voice of the people and, in some cases, to begin formulating new goals and objectives for the local churches. From parishes around the country came over three-quarters of a million responses, listing the people's own perception of the major issues before us and their recommendations to deal with those issues. Of course, it was not a scientific sample; many sections of the country held no program; even where there was a program, the level of participation depended upon many factors. Together with testimony of the regional hearings, this massive body of material represents the hopes and fears, the anxieties and the aspirations of many of our people.

Today it rests in the cold form of "feedback sheets" and computer printouts; yet it is far more than that, for each document represents the personal investment of the people who took part. They deserve our full attention, and our measured, responsible, serious and sincere consideration.

Since the end of the consultation, teams of bishops, scholars, and people active in the ministry of the Church have been examining the results, trying to piece together from the complex fabric of testimony and parish reports, some sense of the major concerns that emerge, some summary of the issues of most pressing importance to the Catholic people. On the basis of their reading of this mass of material they have framed some proposals for our consideration. Though a very full agenda for action, these recommendations do not cover all the hundreds of issues raised or the thousands of actions proposed. Instead they suggest some priorities, and begin the process of moving all of us towards a compassionate, realistic and effective response to the voices of our people. It is our task to consider these proposals, to accept them, reject them, revise them, frame our response to the problems on the basis of our experience, our considered judgment and, most of all, in the light of the Gospel.

I will not try to evaluate any or all of these proposals here. Yet a few comments are in order. For one thing, there appears to be an overwhelming acceptance of this process. Throughout America, wherever Catholics were asked, they expressed their desire to share responsibility for the Church and the nation. They like parish and diocesan pastoral councils; they criticize their shortcomings, but they want these new structures. They want to work closely with their priests and bishops, and they want their leaders to trust them and be accountable to them for the use of Church resources. Everywhere this program took place the participants were respectful, even deferential, towards Church leaders, modest in their demands, wary of quick judgment on questions they perceive as theological or doctrinal. They spoke of the existence of injustice in the Church, but they did not fix blame. They urged all Catholics to work together to make the Church a more fitting witness to the truths that it proclaims.

Anyone who attended these programs at any level knows that they were conducted not in a spirit of complaining or faultfinding, but with a strong affirmation by our people of their Church, of Vatican II, and of one another. The agenda that emerges is the agenda of a hopeful, energetic, self-confident people, determined to keep trying.

But there are problems. We have as a people made less progress than we all had hoped in learning and making our own the teaching of our Church during and since Vatican II. There are many who do not yet know what the Council taught, even more, perhaps, who have little understanding of the social message of the Church as it has developed in recent years. Perhaps because of the pressures arising from life in our advanced industrial society, many of the people are not certain that their Church should even be discussing issues of justice and liberty. We Catholics are always prepared to respond with warmth, generosity and compassion to people in need. We are not always so quick to seek out those responsible for suffering or those abuses of society which cause those needs to arise. While the bishops have often spoken clearly on matters of social justice, the hearings and parish discussions indicate that not only have we not often been heard, but that we have not always convinced our people that we take our words with complete seriousness ourselves. As pastors, we bishops must be alarmed at the failures of our community to share more fully the works of justice; as Catholics all of us must be dismayed at our common failure to make our tradition of social action a living reality at

all levels of our community. To remain a vital resource for the Church, our tradition must be studied and applied to ever-changing situations, which themselves must be analyzed with the help of the social sciences and with respect for personal experience. And study and reflection must lead to action; that is the hardest part.

In addition, many Catholics have become skeptical of the ability of Church leaders to take them seriously. Again and again the listener heard people say that while they would speak up, they were doubtful anyone would really listen and would really try to respond. Many have had the experience of failure, and they are becoming more and more convinced that their leaders in the Church, like their leaders in the community, really don't care what they think. Perhaps it is the ambiguities that surround the development of parish councils; perhaps expectations of laity and religious have outstripped the ability of priests and bishops to deliver; perhaps the Church simply cannot carry all the hopes which people place in it. In any event the same deepening fatalism which grips American culture generally affects the Church; if we fail to respond to the needs expressed, fail even to demonstrate convincingly that, while we cannot solve all the problems, we do care, then we will reinforce the conviction that it simply can't be done, that we can't really become a community of faith and friendship as Vatican II said we should.

The needs, anxieties and hopes expressed throughout the last two years are addressed to the bishops, but through the bishops they are addressed to all the Catholic people, to the nation and the world. They challenge all of us to respond by becoming a more caring, a more faithful, and more responsible community of men and women. Our response must come from our hearts, and then back home in our local communities. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops is going to consider the results of this meeting. I would hope that their response will be full and candid, continuing the process of dialogue, joining their voice with those who have already spoken, seeking to incorporate what has happened during the last two years into the ongoing life of the Church. All of us will try, as best we can, to join in the tasks that will be outlined at this conference; all of us will try, where we disagree, to express clearly the reasons for our disagreement and provide mechanisms for ongoing communication. If we do this job assigned to us by our Church, I am certain that not only will the bishops respond, but we still have made significant progress toward the renewal of our Church and the restoration of confidence in the American promise of liberty and justice for all.

Some may be surprised that a program designed to focus our attention on the concrete responsibilities of American Catholics in response to the "Call to Action" for justice of Pope Paul and the Synod of Bishops should end up giving a great deal of attention to such matters as pastoral renewal, accountability and responsibility within the Church, and personal growth and development. Yet, this surely could not have been unanticipated. In opening the initial hearing in Washington in February of last year, I stated that the "integrity of our work will depend upon our willingness to make our ecclesial life a witness to liberty and justice and to the possibilities of love, friendship and service which liberty and justice create." To renew the Church and to participate in the transformation of the world are not separate and distinct tasks; every major document of the renewal

makes that clear. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin of clarifying our faith and the demands which it makes upon us.

Even more practically, we must see that these tasks go together. We cannot preach a justice to the world that we do not practice ourselves; we cannot demand recognition of the dignity and worth of every human person by governments in combating war and torture and hunger while even one person in our own community is homeless or hungry or mistreated. Of course, none of us can expect to attain an individual perfection before doing our best to live the Christian life in the community; but neither can we expect others to respond to our prescriptions and challenges if we are not trying with all that is within us to practice what we preach. Nor is it out of place to suggest that only as we build in our urban neighborhoods, in our rural communities, in our homes and places of work a way of life which is a source of joy and happiness for ourselves will we be able to be something more in the nation than moralistic prophets of doom. One guesses that the ancient world knew that Christians loved one another by the fact that they seemed at least relatively happy and content with their lives and with one another. In our own country the friendship and support our immigrant forebears found in their parishes and religious associations certainly had something to do with their success in building new lives for themselves, sharing in the building of this great nation. We are, in a very real sense, the heirs of their common endeavors. The record of our hearings and discussions demonstrates that our people possess a degree of fairness, compassion and commitment which would stand well against any comparative test. Much pain and anguish was expressed, to be sure, but the people who attended and testified and talked with one another were not hopeless or joyless or lacking in energy, talent or friendly faces. They were, on the contrary, welcoming and sharing and caring people. And they, and we, are that way because we have learned in our families and Church that no matter what the world may say of us, we are, in fact, of infinite worth and value because our Creator cares for us and we have through our Church the gift of His Spirit.

The trap, of course, is to conclude that our experience of faith and God and sacrament and friendship is sufficient, that our task is accomplished. Let us remember that we do all this, engage in the often discouraging tasks of building parish and diocesan pastoral councils, revising the forms of sacrament and worship, spending endless hours in meetings on parish finances and educational policy, and organizing to bring about justice, not simply because we want to create a community of peace and energy and care, but so that we may all be better prepared to do the Lord's will in our time. It is in order to be more fit instruments of His will that we do these things; we must carry what we receive in and from the Church into the marketplace, there to redeem all of human life by participating and sharing in the struggles of humankind for dignity, justice, peace and liberation. And what we learn there, in the midst of struggle and work, we carry back to the community, to share the experience, to reflect upon it, to make our Christian life in the world a source of enrichment for the *ecclesia*, the community called out from the world, while the experience of the *ecclesia* is the center from which we always must return to renew the face of the earth.

For myself, I can say only one thing with full assurance, and that is that there are no clear, ready-made answers to the problems of Church and society. If, by chance, some day we should reverse the process we have been through, and send teams of lay people, priests, and religious around the country to listen to the testimony of bishops, I suspect that what would be heard would differ only in specific details from what we have heard during the last two years. We, too, remain excited and challenged by the renewal of the Church initiated by the Second Vatican Council, and chastened by the experience of having tried, as best we could, to implement that spirit in our own local churches. We have been frustrated and angry with ourselves, with our priests and people; we have made some mistakes, had some moments of heroism and some moments of weakness. We have tried to learn from the experience, have tried to keep moving forward in spite of the setbacks. Like most people of our generation, we bishops have had to try to grasp and make our own the new visions and hopes excited by renewal while remaining faithful to the beliefs and customs of our childhood and our families. Like them, too, we have probably sometimes wished things would just slow down a bit, that something—the family, the parish, the liturgy—would just regain some of the stability and strength we think it had not too long ago. Most of all, I think we have all wished there were some way we could relate more directly and intimately with our people, share their burdens and have them share ours, know their anguish and let them know our own. If nothing else has happened to those of us who took part in this process, we at least learned this: that when we take the risk of listening and being open to our people, they demonstrate almost without exception a sensitivity to our feelings and a willingness to share our problems with us, if we will only let them.

So, in the next few days, we are going to deliberate about the response we should make to the issues before us. We will discuss and debate; we will have considerable controversy within this hall and will probably generate some controversy outside it. We are a fairly representative gathering of the American Catholic community; as such we contain within ourselves many, if not most, of the ethnic, racial, cultural, economic, sociological and theological differences which characterize our diverse people and country. If we could meet and easily agree on policy for the Church and nation, we probably would not have wrestled with any problem of serious consequence. All of us in this hall are against racism and war and hypocrisy and violence; all of us are committed to the Gospel of Jesus, a Gospel of peace and justice and love and brotherhood and sisterhood; the tough part is translating all that into action. Translating it into a community of faith which conducts worship and prayer and education and works of charity and social service. Translating it into a moral position on questions of public significance, impacting on the processes by which legislation and public policy are made, because it is there that the basic work of justice is done in modern society. Both the pastoral task of building the Church, and the political task of building the world, involve choices, concrete and specific choices of how to spend our money, make our decisions, allocate our resources, direct our personal and collective allocation of time, treasure and talent. None of us knows for sure how best to do these things, none of us can be certain that our program of reform is exactly what the Lord intends for us today. So we have no choice, if we are to be a community of both faith and freedom, except to meet, debate, and make some decisions. That is what we are trying to do here. We are trying to begin a new way of

doing the work of the Church in America. We may fail, but let us try and let people in the nation say of us that they cared enough to try.

In conclusion, one more thought should be expressed. We meet here as **Church**. Penetrated by the Spirit of Christ, we seek His will, not our own. We are conscious of our identity as the Church in the United States. At the same time, we are well aware of our bond in Christ with the Church throughout the world. We are one in our common concerns, in our traditions and in our faith. No one of us could fail to see and appreciate the profound significance of our Holy Father addressing us as we open this conference. What we do is meaningful for the entire Church. Let us begin our work, prayerfully, reflectively, conscientiously. With due accommodation, I voice the hope stated by Paul in his letter to the Church in Philippi: "It is my wish that you may be found rich in the harvest of justice which Jesus Christ has ripened in you to the glory and praise of God." (Phil. 1:11).