



*The Future of the Catholic Church in America and the Challenge
to C.A.L.L.*

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Good morning, my friends!

We have a great program of talks and panel discussions lined up again for today and tomorrow. We are going to be praying together and discussing important issues that we face in our Latino community and in our American society and Catholic Church.

So before we begin this program, I want to offer a brief reflection to try to provide some context and perspective for the conversations we are having this weekend.

I have been thinking a lot in recent months about where America is heading and what the “next America” might look like.

I think we all know that we are living in a period of change in which we face some big questions about our nation’s direction and future. I believe those questions must form the context for our mission as Hispanic Catholics and faithful citizens.

In fact, I would say that the next step in C.A.L.L.’s growth as an association is for us to seriously take up our obligations as leaders in the cultural and political debates that are going to shape American life in the years ahead.

It is one thing to acknowledge the fact that our country and our Church are becoming more and more Latino and Hispanic. That is simply the reality.

What we do with that reality, however, is up to us.

It is not inevitable that Latinos will assume the responsibility that should come with our increasing numbers. A lot is going to depend on the choices and decisions that you and I make as Latino leaders.

Hispanics now make up 16 percent of the U.S. population. We now outnumber African Americans as the largest minority group in our nation’s biggest cities.

Our population is growing. And it is young.

Hispanics accounted for almost 60 percent of our nation’s growth in the last ten years. Nearly one-quarter of American children today age 17 and under are Hispanic.

These trends are even more advanced in the American Church. Since 1960, Hispanics have made up 71 percent of the Church's growth in this country.

More than one-third of Catholics are of Latino descent. And more than half of American Catholics today under the age of 25 are Hispanic.

But as I said, these numbers won't mean much unless Latinos choose to become moral and spiritual leaders in our Church. These numbers won't mean much unless we seek to become a force of influence in the cultural and economic renewal of America.

Which brings us back to the question of where America is going.

The truth is: America is becoming a fundamentally different country. And I'm not only talking about the changes in demographics, or the changes taking place in our economy, or the debates we are having in Washington and in the states about the scope and purpose of government.

Our American culture is changing, too.

We could point to many indicators: We see an rising anti-life and eugenics mentality. We see new legal and cultural attacks on marriage and the family. We see a growing hostility toward religious believers and institutions from elite sectors in our society.

Our society increasingly encourages a kind of practical atheism in which people go about their daily lives as if God does not exist. In fact, about 20 percent of our fellow citizens today claim to have no religious affiliation. And that number is even higher among young adults.

That is the "big picture," my friends. This is the culture we are called to influence with our increasing presence and numbers. This is the culture we are called to evangelize as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Our country needs a new evangelization! Our country needs a renewal of its spirit! And this is our responsibility. As Latinos. As Catholics. As Americans.

We have a duty to lead by example. Now to me, that means a couple of things.

First, it means that we have to deepen our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It means we have to grow in our knowledge of our Catholic faith and the teachings of our Church. We have to really know what we believe as Catholics — and we need to live from those beliefs.

And second, the duty of the new evangelization means that we need to find creative ways to bring the teachings of Jesus Christ and his Church to bear on the political and cultural issues of our day.

My friends, our Catholic faith is a beautiful treasure! The Gospel and the teachings of the Church give us a profound and beautiful vision of human life, society and culture.

This vision is rooted in the sanctity of the human person and in the family as the vital cell of society and the cradle of character and virtue.

This vision of Christian humanism inspired the missionaries who first evangelized this country. This vision inspires our nation's founding documents, which establish America as one nation where men and women of every nationality, race and creed can live as brothers and sisters endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights.

Right now, I think we are living in a time when there is a struggle going on for America's soul. As Latino Catholics, as faithful citizens, we must be engaged in that struggle, my friends.

Because essential questions are at stake. About American identity and national character. About why our country was founded, and what it stands for. About what it means to be an American, and what unites us as one people drawn from many.

So we have to play our part in all the debates and conversations that are shaping the "next America."

As Hispanic Catholics, we have a rich treasury of spirituality to offer our Church and the people of our time. All the richness of our popular piety. All our traditions and customs of prayer and devotion. Our songs, our literature and art. Our patron saints and special feast days.

We are living in exciting times.

Our Church is emerging from a period of trial — stronger, purified, more committed to the Gospel. We are called to lead our Church to greater holiness and dedication to our Lord and his mission.

And the fields of our country are ripe for the harvest of faith. The harvest of the new evangelization.

Many of our fellow Americans are coming to realize that secularism and consumerism are no foundation upon which to build a way of life. They are hungry for what is transcendent. They want God. They want to know his love and his power in their lives.

My friends, we need to be the ones our brothers and sisters can turn to — to find God, and to know a true vision for America.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to continuing our conversation together this weekend.