

**Keynote Address of Bishop Wilton Gregory,
President of the United States Conference of
Catholic Bishops to the
Provincial Chapter of the Order of Friars Minor
Province of the Immaculate Conception
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It is an honor for me to be here today, to address the Provincial Chapter of the Province of the Immaculate Conception. It is particularly wonderful since your heritage as members of the Order of Friars Minor is so intimately linked with the spread of the gospel in the Americas, and in particular, in these United States. Indeed, it was your friars who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage of discovery to the new world; it was the Franciscans who spread the word of the Gospel to the native populations, particularly in what are now the states of California, Texas, and Florida. It was the Franciscans who traveled the seas with the waves of immigrants in the 1800's, and ministered to the Italians, the Irish, Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, Hungarians, and a host of people who came to seek a new life in this country. Indeed, even to this day, we see the heritage of your Franciscan presence from Maine to Florida, from Atlantic to Pacific Coasts, in large cities like Boston, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. Your brothers labor in inner city parishes, in rural missions, and serve the downtrodden and the poor, in soup kitchens, bread lines, AIDS ministries, in schools, hospitals, and prisons. Indeed, the members of the Order of Friars Minor have had a profound impact on the ministry of the Catholic Church in the United States.

History of the Franciscans in World

In fact, for over 800 years, men and women who call themselves Franciscans have been following in the footsteps of your founder, St. Francis of Assisi, and imitating his love for God and for the poor. The roster of saints and holy people throughout the ages is well represented by the Franciscans: Anthony of Padua, Clare of Assisi, Bonaventure, Bernardine of Siena, Maximilian Mary

Kolbe, Juniper Serra, Elizabeth of Hungary, and Padre Pio, just to mention a few.

The Need for Healing

We have just come through a most difficult and embarrassing period in our history, not only throughout the entire Church, but especially here in our country. Indeed, these have been dark days for all of us, as we have watched this terrible scandal eat away at our credibility. The recent scandals involving sexual abuse have caused some to lose their faith in the church's leaders, some even to the point of abandoning the church altogether. All of us will have to agree that there has been great damage done, but the process of bringing about the City of God here on earth cannot be put off or deterred. Indeed, all of us must be involved in the ministry of healing which is so important for the Body of Christ.

Any healing that must take place begins with an acknowledgement of our sinfulness and our own failures in the past, with a resolve to change, to be transformed and renewed. Any renewal we hope to experience as a community must begin with ourselves, with our own efforts to be more faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We cannot be credible witness of the Gospel unless we are open to the working of the Holy Spirit in our own lives, unless we are true disciples of the Lord.

Difficulties in Time of St. Francis

We have to admit that the church has been through difficult times before, some, perhaps, even more difficult than this modern day crisis. In looking back at the history of the church, we can perhaps see darker times. And yet these difficult periods in our history- whether the result of scandal, or persecution, have resulted in great reforms which blossomed into a rebirth of the preaching and living of the Gospel. Indeed, in every age, God has raised up prophets among us, to lead us back to the path of righteousness.

Indeed, the church was in similar straits in the late twelfth century. The Crusades were recruiting ordinary citizens, even children, to march into battle to recover the Holy Land from Islam. Many of the faithful were being led astray by a multitude of heresies. False teachers and reformers also did much damage distorting the message of the Gospel. There was a lack of

respect for the Eucharist and the Liturgy. The leadership of the church was filled with corruption.

Then came that day when young Francesco Bernardone wandered into a wayside chapel on the outskirts of Assisi called “San Damiano”, and received his commission. Jesus himself spoke to Francesco from the crucifix that stood in that dilapidated church saying, “Francis, rebuild my church, for it has fallen into ruins.” It took Francis a little while to realize this command from Jesus was not about stones and mortar, but about the very fabric of the faith of the Church, its spirituality and life in Christ. And so, Francis of Assisi began a spiritual renewal of the Church that still has its affects to this day. The Lord raised St. Francis from among us, to show us the true path to holiness, by living more closely the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Francis, Rebuild My Church

“Francis, rebuild my Church.” Those words spoken to Francis by the Lord Jesus were not only meant for him and him alone. Nor were they meant only for those who follow him as Franciscans. Indeed, they were meant for all times and for all places for all those who put their faith in Jesus Christ and love His name. Yes, the command “Rebuild My Church” is one that the Lord desires of us today. In his encyclical “Rite Expiatis”, given to the Church in 1926, Pope Pius XI said that St. Francis “was sent by Divine Providence for the reformation not only of the turbulent age in which he lived, but of Christian society of all times.” The task of rebuilding the Church falls to all of us, brothers

And yet, as Franciscans, you do have a special place in rebuilding the church, since this command was uniquely your own. Today you can play an important part in the healing and rebuilding that all of us must engage in together so that the Gospel of Jesus Christ may continue to be preached and lived. As sons of Saint Francis, you stand as a reminder to all of us of the Christian values which we embraced through our Baptism, and how those values must take fruit in our lives.

In the final analysis, we recognize the fact that, although we are called to take part in rebuilding the Church, it is the Lord who ultimately rebuilds. The psalmist once wrote, “Unless the Lord builds the house, in vain do the builders labor.” As we call upon the Lord to heal us and restore us, so too

we ask God give us the courage and strength to continue his mission on earth.

Church of Action

Just as any healing must begin with an acknowledgement of our sinfulness, as individuals and as a community simply acknowledging our sinfulness is not enough. We must be a church of action. Francis, you will remember, did not look at the encounter with Christ at San Damiano as his point of conversion, as dramatic and life-changing as that must have been. Rather, he identifies his moment of conversion as something much more mundane and simple- that point when, embracing and kissing the leper, he was able to let go of everything that was an obstacle to his radical living of the Gospel. So too, each and every one of us must do our best seek to put aside anything that becomes an obstacle to living the Gospel. All of us have a part to play in this healing and reform.

What can Franciscans do?

What can you, as Franciscans, do to rebuild this church? Although there are many things that can be done, the first is the most obvious- by your witness and example. The Franciscan rule is beautiful in its simplicity. "The Rule and Life of the Friars Minor is this, to live the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, in obedience, without property, and in chastity." With these words, Saint Francis spelled out for generations of Franciscans the heart of the Christian life. Today we need to constantly remind ourselves that, at the center of our lives as followers of Jesus Christ, is the Gospel- to live as Jesus lived, to teach as Jesus taught, to do what Jesus did. The Gospel, in fact, is the element that binds us all together in our Christian lives. We are called to live the Gospel by virtue of our baptism, but you, as Franciscans, are called to live it uniquely, as a sign to the rest of us of evangelical perfection. As Franciscans, you certainly can be and should be a sign to the rest of the church, through your commitment to your rule of life and the evangelical counsels, of gospel values. In that way, you are of great service to the church and are constant, public reminders of our own baptismal commitment.

As Christians, we are called to prophetic lives and to be a challenge to the society around us. It is unfortunate that we live in a society that we find more and more looks upon churches and organized religion with contempt. Our recent sexual abuse scandal has weakened our moral authority in the world,

and has given even more people an excuse to ignore what we have to say. Our strong position on such issues as abortion, euthanasia, war, the death penalty, and a variety of social and ethical issues have not won us many friends, and there are those who wish they could silence us altogether. Even though our nation was built by people of faith, religion is being seen ever increasingly as unpopular in various segments of our population. We find, for example, the issue of separation of church and state being taken to ridiculous extremes, such that there are some who seek to abolish the very mention of God. It is no wonder that our nation is facing so many crises when it comes to values. Any society that rejects God completely is doomed to failure.

Catholics, and especially clergy and religious, have a moral obligation to preach the Gospel here on earth, and that includes the United States of America. Only when God's will is truly done will we find true freedom and peace. In recent times, especially since September 11, it became very popular to sing that old Kate Smith song "God bless America." But we also need to remind our nation that, before we ask God to bless America, America must bless God by being obedient to His will.

Today, many of the issues our nation and world faces are not only important to the Church, but they are uniquely Franciscan issues, since they were so much a part of Francis' value system, and have become so embedded in the way of life that you, as Franciscans, have chosen.

Ecology

Certainly, St. Francis is known as the patron saint of ecology, because of his love for all nature. Francis saw this world as sacred and holy, because it was created by God himself. Francis' view of this world takes us beyond "respect" to "reverence", as we reverence anything made by God's hands. We should not relegate Francis to birdbaths and gardens, however. Francis should be a reminder to us of the need to preserve our environment, to conserve our resources, to show concern about the purity of our water and air, and the depletion of our rainforests. The degradation of our environment often affects those most vulnerable, the poor, who are being exploited while the resources of their lands are ravaged.

Reverence for Life

Any reverence for life has to take into account the sacredness of human life, which must be preserved from conception to natural death. Franciscans should be bold in their defense of human life in the face of rampant abortion and medical procedures that seek to terminate life. Reverence for life also includes such issues as the abolition of the death penalty, adequate health care for the poor, racial equality, and accessibility of all people to life-saving drugs, as in the case of the HIV-AIDS. I would hope that all of you would take your place in the forefront in defense of what our Holy Father Pope John Paul has called a “culture of life.”

Peace

Certainly, much like the time of St. Francis, we live in a world of war. Violence comes in all forms- war between nations, terrorism, and infighting. Today we can learn much from the example of Franciscans who for centuries, as guardians of the holy places, not only lived peacefully with Jews and Muslims, but, following the example of Saint Francis, who stood before the Sultan Malek el-Kamil, have ministered to the Palestinian people through schools, orphanages, and other outreach programs. And who can forget the brave stand your friars took in remaining in the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem in April of 2002, placing themselves in harms way, in order to preserve the integrity of the very place where Jesus was born and to mediate peace between Palestinians and Israelis. Your order, too, has been visible in the promotion of peace, by your presence at the United Nations, in protesting nuclear testing in Nevada and the School of the Americas at Fort Benning , Georgia, by your strong peace and justice ministry, and reminding the rest of us that war is the result of a failure of justice. As sons of the saint of peace, you must continue to be heralds of peace, as demonstrated by the Peace Prayer of St. Francis, which certainly expresses his spirit. It is no wonder that our Holy Father has traveled so often to Assisi, the city of Peace, to pray for peace, and that, even in the most war-torn place, your brown habit has been revered as a symbol of peace.

The Witness of the Vows

There is no doubt that the rule of life which you profess, as well as the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, stand in stark contradiction to values of our world, and set you apart as beacons of life and hope. Our society today is in great need of people to stand witness to the evangelical counsels. Indeed,

in our society, which is obsessed with sex, power, and riches, the life of the faithful friar can be a powerful witness

Your vow of poverty is a bold reminder to the world of the dangers of riches and consumerism, and how as corporations grow richer, the poor are kept impoverished. In a society that measures success on economics and stock portfolios, your service to the poor speaks to us, not only of the poor Christ, but his own special love for the poor. We need to be constantly reminded of the growing gap between the very rich and the very poor, not only in our world, but even here in our own country. The preferential option for the poor should permeate all your decisions in regard to your way of life and ministry. Through your own poverty, you give meaning and value to each human being, especially the poor among us.

Having been through our sexual abuse scandal, you can easily understand how your vow of chastity stands as a witness in our society which seems obsessed with sex. As our world tells us how important sex is, you are reminders of that we are spiritual, as well as physical, and that the gift of sexuality is to be an expression of married love, and not self-gratification.

Your vow of obedience reminds us of the obedience of Christ, who did his Father's will, and of our Blessed Mother, Mary, whose "fiat" conformed her life completely in obedience and love to God's immense plan.

Living the Rule in the midst of the world

In your living the rule in the midst of the world, Franciscans stand as reminders to all Christians of our common baptismal call to live the Gospel. Your living this rule as you minister to the people of God in parishes, schools, retreat houses, and a variety of other ministries, is an important act of evangelization, especially for those who have not embraced the Gospel, or struggle with it.

But there is so much more that you have to offer the church today. There are many charisms which people would identify as uniquely Franciscan in their character, and for which you have been known for generations. Some of these would be your community life, the life of prayer, a missionary spirit evangelization, preferential option for the poor, and a special mission to the spiritually poor. And it is of great importance that you not water down or

surrender any of these important aspects of your life, for indeed, without them, you would no longer be identified as Franciscans.

Community Life

From the very beginning, Francis wanted his brothers to live a community life, not in isolation from one another. Very often today, ministerial concerns and needs may make it necessary for you to live alone, or away from the community. When you do this, everything suffers. In the statistics that came out in the recent Research Study conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, religious orders had a lower percentage of members accused of sexual misconduct than other groups of priests. Community life had to play a key role in this. Many diocesan priests find themselves living alone, isolated, lonely, and these things can easily lead to improper behavior. Living alone, while becoming more and more the norm among diocesan priests, is not something you should seek out or emulate. Community life is at the heart of your lives as Franciscans, and I would venture to say that most, if not all of you entered religious life because of the attraction of community. And although you may be pressured by bishops or pastoral concerns to do otherwise, your superiors should make it known in those dioceses where you serve that you will not compromise your fraternity for ministry. It would also be possible that perhaps other models of ministry can develop from a stronger community life.

Your community life also stands as a witness to the world where there is a declining emphasis on the importance of the family, where divorce is at such a high rate, and children very often find themselves alone for many hours of the day because of their parents' absence through work or other factors. We find more and more people living alone and in isolation, especially the elderly, the poor, and the mentally ill. Saint Francis did say that the brothers should love each other, as a mother loves her own children. What a wonderful witness, in any diocese or parish, to have a community of truly dedicated Franciscan Friars living in community and working in their midst.

Life of Prayer

From community life also flows a life of prayer- both common prayer and individual prayer. Like all Christians, and especially those called to special service in the church, prayer is the lifeblood of our faith. Without prayer, we

are empty, barren. Your prayer life again stands as a witness in a society that is becoming more and more atheistic. At the center of your prayer life should be the Eucharist and the Liturgy of Hours, as well as time for meditation and spiritual reading. We also need to remember that the life of prayer is something that is not simply done, but rather, it is lived at all times. While our whole lives can be seen as a prayer, we must set time aside to nourish the contemplative dimension of our lives.

One of the problems we experience in the church today, with declining numbers of priests and brothers, as well as the aging of our populations, is the increased demand of the laity on our time. Indeed, it can be difficult for any of us not to respond to those in need. However, abandoning the essentials of our spirituality and, for you, of your Franciscan life, in favor of ministry is too high a price to pay. Without making time for common and private prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, days of recollection, and retreats, we can no longer serve adequately the needs of the People of God. We will become drained and empty. Unfortunately, in ministry situations, these often are the first things that we abandon. Resist at all times any temptation to fall into the mistake of looking at ministry as a worthy substitute for these things- be it prayer or community. We must instruct the laity to be respectful of the life of religious, especially in ministry situations. Part of your life must be set apart. Ministry places many demands on the life of a priest and a friar. Your own sense of ministry and generosity often places the perceived needs of the people before your own community and spiritual needs. Can the Franciscan Friar be true to the calling of St. Francis in the modern day parish or ministry? As friars, you must constantly be attentive to the contemplative dimension of your lives. As the number of priests and religious dwindles, the demands on the few will grow. In the end, we cannot hope to meet the ever-increasing demands of those we serve if we are not men of contemplation, prayer, and community. As in any situation, there is some need for flexibility. But the question you Franciscans have to ask yourselves is this- can you still minister in the church and meet the ever-increasing demands of the faithful while still being faithful to your way of life?

Missionary Spirit of Evangelization

What do I mean by a missionary spirit of evangelization? Your own Province was founded by missionaries. They were courageous and faith-filled men

who left their homeland of Italy and came to the Eastern United States to minister to immigrants- first the Irish, and then their own Italian countrymen. They endured great hardships in a foreign land, with a strange language, and with great hostility from both government and citizens who were not happy with the presence of foreigners on our shores. And yet, they approached their work with a missionary zeal- willing to put aside old customs and embrace new ones, trying new ways to minister to all people, especially the poorest of the poor. Indeed, these men were so successful that they very quickly established a university, a seminary, and many parishes, and from their labors two Franciscan provinces were established on the East Coast of our country.

At the heart of your vocation as Franciscans is that of being a missionary. As Jesus sent his disciples out two by two, St. Francis also sent his followers out into the whole world. Your Order's Plenary Council of 2001 referred to your community as a "Fraternity in Mission." You do this primarily through the witness of your lives in fraternity and minority; in your preaching; through intellectual and material activities; through your pastoral ministry, and through the evangelical presence of service and gifts. In particular, you are called to evangelize as Franciscans- as Friars Minor.

Preferential Option for the Poor

From this missionary zeal should emerge your service to the poor, which is so integral to the Franciscan calling. Sometimes we can get too comfortable with the models of ministry that we have grown accustomed to, and fail to see new opportunities growing out of difficult situations. Although many of your friars work in traditional ministries, such as parishes and retreat houses, you should not be afraid to develop new ways to assist the poor and spread the Gospel. Your province certainly has achieved much in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, helping to give birth to a new vibrant independent Province and fostering native vocations. Although your friars have a heavy concentration in parishes, your strength will always be in your diversity. Foster among you special ministry to the poor, to the inner city, to minorities, to the outcast, the homeless, to those ill and in prison. Do not lose your apostolic zeal. As missionaries, you should be willing to put aside the familiar and the comfortable, and seek new endeavors to serve the marginalized and the poor. Do not become locked into ministries and works

which no longer serve the people of God, or have become antiquated in their ability to be of true service to those most in need. As missionaries, you are also called to itinerants, which allows you, like the founders of your Province, to take on new endeavors unencumbered, without being attached to a particular place, or ministry, or parish. Do not be afraid to take on the strange or the new if it will better serve your community and God's people.

Ministry to the Spiritually Poor

Indeed, there are many other ministries for which your Order is renown, which are of great service to the Church, which you should also treasure. One of these is ministry to the spiritually poor, through spiritual renewal services. Your friars have been known throughout the centuries as great confessors, bringing the faithful to a deeper appreciation of the Sacrament of Penance. Your friars are famous for their compassion and understanding as they celebrate the Sacrament of Penance in the Basilicas of Rome, and many popes, as well as cardinals and bishops, have sought out Franciscans as their confessors and spiritual guides. Another area where the tradition of the Franciscans is so valuable is that of parish missions. Much like the itinerant friars who wandered from place to place, your friars have had a valuable tradition of preaching Lenten missions, days of recollection, and retreats for diocesan priests and laity alike. The sad situation that we deal with today is that our lay people by and large are thirsting for more spirituality, for more knowledge about the teachings of the church. Many do not know the very basics of our faith, our teachings, or our doctrine. The friars can be of wonderful service to the church through these spiritual programs.

Vocations

Most religious communities today, like many dioceses, need to refocus on what is important to them, because of dwindling numbers. We are confronted with our own limitations, be it through age, infirmity, or a scarcity of vocations. And yet, in all this, we must never lose sight of what sets us apart from the rest of the world. When we live our calling in its fullest, others will follow. When we compromise our values, others will see no attraction in our lives. The question of vocations is a difficult one today. And yet, you have the greatest vocation director any diocese or order could hope for- Francis himself. For, even in this modern age, Francis continues to be attractive to many.

There are some things all of us need to be cautious of, however, in admitting new men to our ranks. While there may be more temptation to seek “numbers” because of the growing ministerial pressure on our communities, we must resist this. Those who seek entrance into your community must be holy and healthy men, well balanced, and yet men who understand their calling and who identify with the values of St. Francis and your order. We need men whose lives are transparent- that is, who do not have hidden lives or secrecy. This is part of community life, that we be open and honest with one another. We need men who are already familiar with prayer, and the contemplative life. We need men who have had an experience of ministry. After all, the apostolic life is not the sole domain of clergy and religious. One does not need ordination or vows to already be helping others. The greatest detriment today to vocations is our own failure to be true to our calling. When we live fully the life we profess, vocations will come.

People must be taught to understand the special nature of religious. Your communities must stand out as oases in the marketplace- as places of silence and reflection in the middle of the city, town, or village. Your lives should reflect what the Christian life can- and should be.

So, how can you as Franciscans best respond today to the command “Rebuild my Church?” By being faithful to your way of life, your charism, your vows. We know how much St. Francis loved the cross, and all of us have to be willing to take up our cross. At the heart of the cross is sacrifice, the willingness to give of ourselves for the sake of others. Sacrifice is not an easy thing. It demands us to surrender all of the things this world offers us – all the things that this world says will make us happy, will give us fulfillment.

The concept of sacrifice is becoming more and more difficult for our society to understand. People today place seek comfort, possessions, and pleasures of the flesh before anything spiritual or altruistic. We live in a consumerist society- where to be happy is equated with having more and more, the latest, the biggest, the greatest, the newest. We do this in the face of rampant poverty in the rest of the world. Francis stripped himself of everything in imitation of his Lord. He lived radically the message of the Gospel, having nothing for himself, and the less he had, the happier he was. This is a message that our society needs to hear today. As an international religious

community, you can stand as a great witness as poor, chaste, and obedient Franciscans.

Conclusion

Brothers, we are partners in the rebuilding of God's church- partners under the kingship of Christ, our Lord and Savior. We are partners as bishops, priests, religious, and lay people- seeking to establish God's kingdom here on earth. Let us work with one another, support one another, cooperate with one another. The task before us is great, but with the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit, we will succeed. Let us continue to announce and realize the Good News of the Kingdom of God. And so, brothers, let us be obedient to the challenge of St. Francis in his own words: "Let us begin anew, for up to now we have done nothing."