

# U.S.C.C.B. Called to Communion

*Reflection on St. Charles Borromeo Oration at the Fifth Provincial Council, 1579*

Hermanos en Cristo, Bishops of the United States, Brother Bishops,  
I need you to know I come as your sister to share a personal reflection that results from listening as deeply and lovingly as I could to the people and the times before us. With Charles Borromeo, I pray: Spirit of our God “*we beg you today, be present to us who are called together into one in your name.*”

I accepted your courageous invitation because of my deep love for our Church, and I love so much about it! I love the young man kneeling in the pew next to me, the faith sharing in our R.C.I.A. programs, our children lining up for catechism, the Fish Frys in Lent, the smell of incense during Eucharist, the Christmas choirs, our theologians searching for the right questions, and our seminarians. And yes, I love those who have been hurt by our Church, who clamor for a listening heart and our courage to own the truth.

I am here for all of them, because, brother bishops, this church, this faithful people, hold so much pain, so many questions, so much grief. For months, I personally have found the words of the creed- “*One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic*” -painful to pronounce. I confess I was even tempted to mount my personal boycott by remaining silent for that part until something concrete happened. Then, I realized, this was my church, and wondered what was mine to do?

A young professor came to see me; anguished she asked “Sister, why would I stay in the church?” It broke my heart to hear her pain, her sadness. After a long silence I said: “We stay because of Jesus Christ. People fail, we fail, we make mistakes, but we are here because we were first encountered by Christ.” How do we return to Christ for mercy and reconciliation, for the grit to do what is ours to do?

Brothers, Hermanos, St. Charles Borromeo speaks from a moment such as this, when the Church had to recall its identity as: *ecclesia semper reformanda*. He tells that assembly, “*this clergy and people... see you... they will now observe...*” Literally, the eyes of the people who are in pain for the church, the eyes of every victim of abuse in our church and everyone else in our society-- indeed, the whole world-- will now observe. I have a feeling it took a lot of courage to come to this meeting.

## Called to Gather

How do we listen to what God is saying to us? I believe this listening needs to happen in communion. God's voice will be heard only when we are together. Charles Borromeo explains to the bishops that they must "*apply [themselves]... with minds most united, with a most united will and with the same devotion and equal zeal, as with one pastoral and episcopal spirit*". As difficult as coming to this meeting was, as disparate and often contradictory your opinions have been, first, you must become one. The Spirit comes to a community gathered in faith. Peter Maurin, who helped Dorothy Day found the Catholic Worker Movement, used to say: "when you don't know what else to do, keep going to the meetings because Pentecost happened in a meeting!"<sup>1</sup> So, with all the church, I pray you have the courage to remain gathered, the courage to deeply listen to one another, the courage to spend time in conversation with those you know least and those with whom you disagree most, to find the common ground, and to create relationships that will enable true discernment.

Just as I pray that you will have the courage to remain together and hold the ambiguity, I pray that you notice your family, the Church. Gathered around the table of the Eucharist, where we all recognize the presence of Christ in our midst, is your entire U.S. church. I pray you will look to your left and to your right, to the men and women that have been called into this communion. You shepherd one of the most diverse and most gifted churches in the world. You need the diversity of skill, talent and insight gathered around this table of communion. This may be the grace of this moment: the actual need to turn to the lay men and women who can lead through this time; the grace to turn to our Catholic universities to help us find the brave questions we need to be asking, to our Catholic hospitals to help us understand how to treat victims of abuse with respect and reverence, restoring their human dignity. This is a time for new collaboration and partnership in our Church, for embracing the full spirit of synodality.<sup>2</sup> We heard our young people at the last synod challenge us to be a more inclusive church. Look to your left and to your right- the men of the church need the women of the church to re-create our Catholic Communion.

## Called to Listen

I pray for a listening heart for our entire Church. I pray for a deep capacity to listen to the heart of our people; the reverence to listen to a victim's story in such a way that in our listening they may become survivors, their truth owned, their dignity restored. Charles

---

<sup>1</sup> Ron Rolheiser, *Sacred Fire*, p. 130. Also: <http://ronrolheiser.com/pentecost-happened-at-a-meeting/#.W-01DJP0mxo>

<sup>2</sup> International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the life and mission of the Church", March 2, 2018, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_synodalita\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_it.html)

Borromeo wrote that the Spirit arouses the capacity *“for bringing every possible cure to the peoples entrusted to [your] our care.”* Bishops, he goes on to say, should become “physicians, healers”- and the best physicians are first good listeners! I pray for a listening heart into the pain and sadness of the men and women of our Church. I pray for a listening heart, into the anger of survivors and their families and parishioners, into their doubt and despair.

I especially pray that you receive this gift to listen as pastors.

Women religious have learned a thing or two about leadership the last few years, and I would like to offer you some of our learnings. We have been tried and tested in many ways; sometimes by our own despair, by misunderstandings and controversy, and even by the loss of our own sense of accomplishment. No, we are not what we used to be, and it took us years to find God’s grace in the transformation. We too have mismanaged and lost institutions. And, for every dark time we had to navigate, we learned something new about our call and our faithful God. First, we are learning that the only way to face any crisis is together, in communion, as sisters to one another. And if you think brothers fight, go ask how long sisters can hold a grudge! Yet, we find that what holds us together is always deeper than what sets us apart. Second, we are learning that times of crisis call us to lean into our core identity. Every challenge makes us articulate ever more faithfully what our discipleship of Jesus Christ means, allowing us to discern what we need to let go of and what we must care for that is most precious. We are learning that our encounter with God deepens the roots that will hold us through the strong winds of every storm. Finally, we are learning to cultivate a listening, contemplative heart. Without a deep spiritual life held in communion with our sisters, we lack the humility to discern the good from the bad spirits, we lack the authenticity to identify God’s deeper desires, and we lack the courage to remain at the table. So this I offer you: God’s mercy enfolded us through every crisis and allowed us to remain faithful women because we listened. We are faithful, despite our loss, despite our grief. We stand now with our Church trusting the promise of the Resurrection.

## **Called to Renewed Spiritual Depth**

Because of what we are learning as women religious, I offer you the image of what was left of a beautiful oak tree outside our Generalate office in San Antonio. I found out in recent weeks that this tree had a rotten core despite its apparent health on the outside. I learned that without a core it could not sustain its branches and they could fall and hurt someone, or slowly die and even catch on fire. With sadness, I have mourned its loss, no



more shade, the birds are gone. But without a core it could not survive. Trees like this are often the victims of what is called a “heart rot”: “the result of a fungal infection that enters the tree through wounds in the bark.”<sup>3</sup>

I stood there for a long time, wondering what nature was telling me, and then, what the analogy might mean for our life in the Church. I pray for you, because women religious have had our share of structures that lost their core and therefore could not sustain our life. Every time our ministries or communities failed to nourish the core, when we found false security in our ministerial achievements or in numbers of all kind, we learned we had to dismantle the structure. I wonder what the metaphor of this tree will mean to your task as leaders of our church. Could it be that some of our structures are no longer relevant in a renewing and vibrant Church? Could it be that like my tree they have run their course? Could it be that we must recognize our failure to care for the core and trust a new tree will grow with God’s grace? The time has come to cut down the trees we need to, in order to clear the forest to plant the new saplings that will hold the core of the Gospel. I pray that you will have the courage to take down any structure with a “rotten core” and to plant the seedlings that will take time to grow.

## **Called to Encuentro**

Brother Bishops, you have one another! Are you brother to your brother? I pray you go back to where you started, before allegations, accusations and declarations, before the mistakes and the litigations. I pray you can remember the moment you knelt before the Seat of Peter and swore allegiance to the Church in the person of our Holy Father. Can you be the men of honor that you were anointed to be? Brother Bishops, you might have made mistakes, even serious ones; you will have serious decisions to make; but you are still those men who were anointed that day. You were anointed to be of one mind and heart with the Holy See, but you should not expect the Vatican to resolve what is yours to resolve. The Vatican does not have the knowledge, resources and gifts that you do; you can be models for the rest of the world. I urge you to seize the opportunity.

There are among you Brother Bishops who understand the gravity of this moment and are making many efforts to respond with integrity. Listen deeply to one another, to what has worked, to the inspiration of the Spirit already at work among you. Turn to your brother bishops who have had the courage to listen to survivors, to begin exploring new structures, to own the historical responsibility of the institution they represent, who have

---

<sup>3</sup> “Tree Acoustics Identify Rot and Decay”, Tuesday, April 29, 2014, <http://physicsbuzz.physicscentral.com/2014/04/tree-acoustics-identify-rot-and-decay.html>

collaborated with law enforcement, and who have embraced the vulnerability of transparency.

The final part of my reflection is the result of my experience at the V Encuentro. I was delighted to see so many of you there. I was moved to see how vulnerable you felt to all of us. We had all seen the media coverage, and yet our Latino community encouraged you over and over again. “Why?” I asked some of them, and they shared “Sister, we know what has happened, but we are still family.” The Encuentro that moved me most happened at the dinner where the younger participants had conversations with the bishops. Those young men and women had a lot to say that night; they were not afraid to speak the truth, but they did so with great respect, because they said at my table, “We love our Church”. And you listened! Toward the end of the evening, participants were called to stand, place their hand on their bishop’s shoulder, and bless him. Here is the image from that night.



At the Encuentro, I learned that to get to the blessing, first you must show up. You must be willing to enter into a culture of encounter. Second, you need to remain there without an agenda, with an openness to surprise, to the unexpected; in short, you need to become vulnerable in the midst of the Church. Just as you were in the Encuentro, one among many, at the table, the sessions, the breaks. Third, you have to listen, without interruption, with intent, with appreciation, like you did that night. Then you will receive the blessing to go forth and do what you must.

You can do it again! Today the entire Church is praying you remain in the spirit of Encuentro to find what is yours to do.

Brother Bishops, Hermanos Obispos,  
may you act with the urgency and integrity that will give us hope!

May the words of Our Lady of Guadalupe encourage you:

***“... no se turbe tu corazón, no temas esa enfermedad, ni otra alguna enfermedad y angustia. ¿No estoy yo aquí que soy tu Madre?”***

[Let not your heart be troubled, do not fear that sickness, nor any other sickness or anxiety. Am I not here, who am your Mother?]



Thank you for listening.