

**MINISTRY AT THE CATHEDRAL IN CRITICAL TIMES**  
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The current global crisis is forcing us to scrutinize all areas of public life. All of our educational, political, economic and religious institutions and systems of faith are being challenged. It is altogether appropriate and necessary that we examine the role of the Church in society and in the world in general. Today we focus on one area of the life of the Church, and, in particular, that of the cathedral. The cathedral today is being challenged to re-examine its role as it seeks to serve the local and wider community as a result of the events of September and their aftermath. I hope to contribute in a small way to this re-examination.

Years ago I was at a check-out counter at a supermarket in Las Cruces. In front of me was a Native American waiting to pay for several trays of eggs, each tray holding at least two dozen. I commented to the stranger that he must be shopping for a huge breakfast. He said in a frustrated voice, “No, I’m buying food for my mother. She spends all her social security check playing bingo at church halls. I don’t see why we need churches anyway. Why don’t people just pray under the trees?” Good question. Actually many people pray just about anywhere, including praying under the trees, as well as under the sun, the moon and the stars.

While we’re asking the question, why do we need churches, we can also ask, why do we need cathedrals? I believe Archbishop Dan Pilarczyk of Cincinnati answered that question well to this group several years ago. He was asked this question at a parish council

meeting by a parishioner who could not understand why they had to support the Archdiocese: “When push comes to shove, Archbishop, just what does this parish get out of being part of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati?”

The Archbishop answered, “What do you get out of being part of the Archdiocese? You get to be Catholic and there’s no other way to do it except by being connected with the Church universal through the diocesan church and through the ministry of the diocesan bishop. Without that connection you could save a lot of money, but you wouldn’t be part of the Church.” In his talk the Archbishop went on to say that years later, when faced at budget time with the subsidy the Archdiocese had to make to the cathedral, he asked himself, “What do we get out of this?” His own answer was the one he gave to the congregationalist parishioner, “You get to be Catholic!” Of course you don’t need a cathedral the way you need a bishop or a diocese, he explained, but a local church without a cathedral is missing one of the major expressions of its catholicity.

To mention the word *cathedral* in the U.S. today conjures up a variety of images. Given the vastness of the country, the numerous cultures that make up our American Church and the many generations that span our history, we should not be surprised by the mosaic formed by the cathedrals of the United States. Some were built over two hundred years ago; others, like mine, were constructed in the late twentieth century, and not as cathedrals originally, but as parish churches. Some are prominent architectural statements set in important urban areas. The cathedrals of St. Augustine, Tucson, New Orleans, Santa Fe, New York City and the old cathedral of St. Louis are symbols of their cities. Those of San

Antonio, Corpus Christi and Colorado Springs are examples of how important cathedrals are to the skyline of those cities. Others are in smaller towns and of modest design. Some cathedrals are in an area of the city that allows for a vibrant parish life, while others have experienced the departure of inner city dwellers to the suburbs, depriving these cathedrals of the people they were built to serve.

In 1979, Archbishop John Roach of St. Paul and Minneapolis made the following remarks:

“As parishes, many of our cathedrals are in depressed neighborhoods, areas in which the cities have grown old and lost both grace and vibrance... Some of our cathedrals are found in business districts, others in slum areas, places where it is dangerous and unwise to schedule evening services. These places have come to the final days of community and our buildings loom in past splendor.

It is painful to see...cathedral parishes struggling with insufficient staff, overwhelmed with the problems blighting our inner cities, the problems of the aged held captive in lonely apartments, the poor in transient hotels, and the aged congregations clinging onto a once great dignity.

Yet it is an irony of the Gospel that there, in the midst of all this world's most serious problems, there, is the chair of the bishop. It stands not as a witness to the past but to the existential concern we have as a Church community for the poor. In what better place could that chair be placed, for here it becomes a sacrament to all of our concern.”<sup>i</sup>

The styles of cathedral buildings are hardly uniform. Many U.S. cathedrals were built in the neo-gothic style; others were inspired by Spanish colonial and mission concepts. Those built in the second half of the twentieth century are more modernistic. Then there are the eclectic edifices, borrowing from different times, traditions and inspirations.

Currently in the U.S, there are new cathedrals being built and planned. A good number of our cathedrals have undergone or are undergoing substantial renovation. We seem to be in a veritable renaissance of cathedral construction and renovation.<sup>ii</sup> There are lively conversations going on, particularly among church architects and liturgists regarding these projects. Even bishops have entered the discussions. In my opinion the current debate, sometimes passionate, over the way cathedrals should look and what functions their form should serve, is a healthy one. The desired outcome of such debates should not be who or which style will win, but whether the chosen design will benefit worshipers, and their spirituality, and form bonds of communion. The cathedral talk of our times can only be constructive, eventually, of a new and creative outcome.

A positive contribution to cathedral life has been the recent influx of new immigrants to our inner cities, especially those from Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. Blessedly for the Church, the majority of these happen to be Roman Catholic. Some cathedrals are responding with enthusiastic efforts to welcome all newcomers. Emergency and legalization services are being offered to all newcomers, and questions about their legal status are set aside.

The gifts that immigrants bring to some of these cathedral are like a refreshing rain in the midst of a drought. They bring raindrops of spiritual-cultural richness, to quench the thirst of a dry land longing for the life-giving waters of the spirit. Cathedrals have become, in many of our episcopal sees, places where many streams of the living waters of grace and

spiritual traditions converge. As they make their homes in the inner cities, many new immigrants have brought life to the cathedral pastoral scene.

Some of these new immigrants, and I will refer to the Latino culture, the one with which I am most familiar, bring an incredible tradition of faith experience and expressions, one I would characterize as deeply inculturated. Popular religiosity or piety are signs that faith has been deeply ingrained into the culture. Processions, pilgrimages, Christmas and Holy Week pageantry, the feasts of Mary and celebrations of patronal saints began in colonial Spanish America with the arrival of the missionaries. The early evangelizers of the Americas had a genius for inculcating Christian and gospel messages in the minds and hearts of all, including those of the unlettered and unschooled. In a way, popular depictions of the story of salvation through theater-like re-enactments or ceremonies evangelize people much like the stained glass windows of the medieval Gothic cathedrals in Europe.

Yet, there is a difference. With popular devotions, the people are more than mere spectators; they actively participate in the evangelizing process. Father David García of San Fernando Cathedral of San Antonio states that the people “read the story by being part of the story.”

As important as the official liturgy is for the life of the Church, popular devotions and other faith expressions are indispensable elements in the religious calendar of the ordinary Latino and other folks.

The last time I was at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City two years ago, I noticed how many people, mostly Latino, would come in off the street to commend

themselves to Our Lady of Guadalupe. The image is near one of the main entrances to the cathedral. I am sure that for many of these faithful, paying their respects to the Virgin is a daily ritual on their way to work or on their way home.

Popular religiosity is not simply a nostalgic return to the homeland; it is more than preserving a tradition for its own sake. It can be an authentic evangelizing event, leading to conversion and deeper commitment to the ways of the gospel.<sup>iii</sup> A celebration of popular import can serve to heal and strengthen the bonds of the community of faith. It can also serve to heighten resolve to address, as a community, the social concern of the moment.

I believe what should ordinarily happen at the cathedral, that is, the gathering of large numbers of the people of the diocese, can happen elsewhere, as if the cathedral venue moves around. In my diocese, this occurs at the small shrine of San Lorenzo, located in a beautiful oasis-like valley of western New Mexico. On August 10, the annual feast, people come from near and far for a Mass of healing. On the last Sunday of October, formerly the celebration of the feast of Christ the King, approximately 20,000 people climb the mountain on the border between the U.S. and Mexico, where the three states of New Mexico, Texas and Chihuahua converge. Crowning the mountain is a beautiful sculpture of Christ the King. On the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe in our diocese, every church becomes the cathedral, as it were, as processions, liturgical and cultural dances, and fiestas take place. I am certain this phenomenon is happening more and more in many of the U.S. dioceses.

The cathedral, as a place where popular religion is a hallmark, is not unique to the Latino spirituality that I have described. I would like to go back the twelfth and thirteenth century where we can cite a parallel faith expression.

A cathedral that never ceases to inspire and to serve as a model for other cathedrals both architecturally and pastorally is that of Notre Dame de Chartres. This precious gem, this extraordinary gift of medieval Europe for the ages, this soaring giant whose asymmetrical steeples stand as sentinels for the Queen's palace, continues, even after eight centuries, to make one's spirit soar. This cathedral, according to Henry Adams, in his monumental and classic *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, first published in the United States in 1904, captures the faith of ordinary folks in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Adams brought together in masterful synthesis his knowledge of politics, economics, psychology, science, philosophy, theology, art, architecture and literature, in order to give us a glimpse of the religiosity of medieval Europe. His thorough and brilliant analysis of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary in the middle ages is one of the great contributions to our understanding of the popular faith of those times.

Adams explains that the cathedral's design and detailed sculpture, glass and woodwork was ordered by the Blessed Virgin herself. Christ is identified with his mother. The main entrance was meant to make the pilgrims feel they were entering the Court of the Queen of Heaven. "The Virgin in her shrine was at least as living, as real, as personal an empress as the Basilissa at Constantinople!"<sup>iv</sup>

The author makes the claim that the Chartres cathedral was “exclusively intended for the virgin... man came to render homage or to ask favors. The Queen received him in her palace, where she alone was at home, and alone gave commands.”<sup>v</sup>

Those involved in the construction of the cathedral were so devoted, so thoroughly dedicated to their task, so enamored of the Virgin that they threw themselves totally, body and soul, into a project whose finality they would never see. Seeing the final result of work of their hands did not matter; their satisfaction came from being involved in the process and serving their Queen.

We cannot help but be mightily impressed by the conscientious way in which they went about their building. Adams quotes a letter from Archbishop Hugo of Rouen to Bishop Thierry of Amiens:

“The inhabitants of Chartres have combined to aid in the construction of their church by transporting the materials; our Lord has rewarded their humble zeal by miracles which have roused the Normans to imitate the piety of their neighbors....Since then the faithful of our diocese and o other neighboring regions have formed associations for the same object; they admit no one into their company unless he has been to confession, has renounced enmities and revenges, and has reconciled himself with his enemies.”<sup>vi</sup>

In another letter, that of Abbot Hymon of St. Pierre-sur-Dieues in Normandy, to the monks of Tutbury Abbey in England, he seemed to be more surprised than proud of what he witnessed in the construction of the cathedral:

“Who has ever seen! Who has ever heard tell, in times past, that powerful princes of the world, that men brought up in honors and in wealth, that nobles, men and women, have bent their proud and haughty necks to the harness of carts, and that, like beasts of burden, they have dragged to the abode of Christ these wagons, loaded with wines, grains, oil, stone, wood, and all that

is necessary for the wants of life, or for the construction of the church?...so great is the difficulty, yet they march in such silence that not a murmur is heard...they forget all hatred, discord is thrown far aside, debts are remitted, the unity of hearts is established.”<sup>vii</sup>

The Abbot goes on to describe the wonderful scene when the workers reached the construction site. All night they would pray and sing hymns and canticles. On each wagon they lit tapers and lamps and on the wagons they placed the infirm and prayed over them with the relics of saints. Through the entire labor of love in the building of the cathedral, the presence of the Virgin was felt. Such was their reverence for her, that they behaved in this extraordinarily Christian way. Would that our cathedral or parish building committees followed their example!

There are many lessons to learn from these great cathedral builders besides their faith and devotion. Verily the cathedral, during and after its construction, had a total effect on the life of the town or city where they were built. The economy, the social and political life of the community was affected, as was its artistic and literary life. Chartres, writes Adams, did not reflect the industries of a world’s fair, as did Lyon or Paris, for Chartres was never a manufacturing town, but a shrine, such as Lourdes, where the Virgin was known to have performed miracles. Still the shrine turned itself into a market and created valuable industries.

I believe deeply that the pastoral plan, if you will, for the cathedral for the twenty-first century is found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. We would immediately think of course, of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, and this is understandable, since

the cathedral has to plan and execute the best liturgies and thus provide the model for the parishes of the diocese. From a pastoral and ministerial point of view, however, it is in the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* where we find the mission, the function, the *raison d'être* of the Church, spelled out eloquently, thoroughly and in a most challenging and compelling way. There we find how the Church has to live in the world and not be of it; how the Church must challenge the world, as well as be challenged by it; and how the Church has to be in constant dialogue with the world, its cultures and institutions. There in *Gaudium et Spes* we can read the great plan the Church has drafted for itself as to how it will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Since the cathedral sets the pace for the other parishes of the diocese, it must model what the Church teaches about herself in reference to the world. I am reminded of the cathedrals in Latin America, which are symbolic of the relationship of Church and world. I think immediately of the cathedral of San Salvador in the Central American country of El Salvador. This cathedral reminds us of the martyrdom of Archbishop Arnulfo Romero, the Jesuits at the Universidad de Centro América, the American missionaries, and so many others; these will have an honored place in the history of the Church in Latin America and in the world.

Here is what happened the day the funeral of Archbishop Romero took place: his bullet-pierced body was brought that Palm Sunday to the plaza in front of his cathedral, where an outdoor Mass was planned. The Pope sent Cardinal Ernesto Corripio of Mexico City to represent him. The Nuncio was there as were bishops from several countries from

Latin America, the United States and Europe. The Mass began but was interrupted by the explosion of a bomb. Immediately gunfire from the rooftops of the surrounding government buildings started and the crowd began to disperse. Quickly the coffin was moved inside and buried. Forty people died in the plaza that day, most trampled to death. This was the second unfinished Eucharist that marked the end of Archbishop Romero's earthly life. The first was the one at which he was assassinated.<sup>viii</sup>

I have learned that the cathedral of San Salvador was built on a site considered sacred by the Mayan people. It had always had a deep spiritual meaning for the Indian people of the region. Thus it is not surprising that people would come there with their deepest yearnings and aspirations for a better existence. In El Salvador, this cathedral stands for something of mystical import that dates back to pre-colonial times further sanctified by events of our own history. No other Cathedral in Latin America appears to have the same mystical significance.

There was also the role played by the cathedral and Cardinal Carlos Silva of Santiago de Chile. During the difficult General Pinochet years, this Cathedral became a haven for those seeking sanctuary and a place where groups demonstrated for human rights. The *arzobispado* adjacent to the cathedral became the offices for the “*Vicariato para la Solidaridad*”, an organization of lawyers and others for the defense of human rights. This organization especially served families who were anxious to locate and free their relatives who might be held as political prisoners. The cathedral became the visible symbol of the commitment of the Church of Chile for the defense of human rights.

In November, 1986, Cardinal Bernardin led a commission from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to Santiago de Chile at the request of the Chilean bishops. I was privileged to be part of that commission. I remember vividly an emotional interfaith service on behalf of human rights that was held at the cathedral. Towards the end of the service a tear gas bomb exploded at the main entrance. We had to exit through a side door. For us in attendance, this event gave us a glimpse of the drama the Chilean people were living at the time.

In the early to mid-1970's the Cathedral of San Paulo became a symbol of the crusade for human rights in Brazil. Ecumenical and interfaith gatherings were held at the cathedral at the invitation and direction of Archbishop Paulo Evaristo Arns to foster solidarity. One of the major events which took place at the cathedral in the 1970's was a funeral for a journalist of Jewish background who had been an important crusader for human rights. Because of the efforts of the military to prevent the service from taking place, it became a major and significant event.

There are two other cathedrals whose role has been dramatic in the history of their people. One is the cathedral of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas. Various groups on one side or the other have used the cathedral plaza for demonstrations that champion their cause. From his cathedral pulpit, Bishop Ruiz has spoken powerfully in the defense of the poor indigenous people of his diocese. There, the Zapatistas and their opponents have met in their efforts to reach a peaceful settlement for the people of Chiapas. Adjacent to this

cathedral, an office for human rights was established and became effective in organizing networks of global solidarity that gave strong support for the efforts of Bishop Ruiz.

Finally, I would like to mention the cathedral of Havana, Cuba. It is there that the people continue to experience the solidarity of the Church for the people's aspirations for greater freedom. The cathedral plaza, I have heard it said, is the heart of the Church in Cuba.

For me, these cathedrals serve as models as to how the cathedral can live up to its mission in critical times. The message and spirit of the conciliar document, *Church in the Modern World*, comes alive in the experience and witness of these and other cathedrals. Through God's grace and intervention, they have provided a focus for: human rights, the dignity of work, the rights of workers, economic justice, and the cause of peace. The Council Fathers also address culture, education, art forms, politics, the arms race, and ecumenical and interfaith dialogue -- all areas that need to fit somewhere in the pastoral mission of the cathedral in our day. Not every cathedral can and should do all these things, but at least some of these should guide its ministry.

Many of our cathedrals serve as venues for orchestral and choral concerts. Few cathedrals have the unique opportunity to house a "cathedral choir school." I only know of the one in Salt Lake City at the Cathedral of the Madeleine. In Las Cruces our cathedral has been the place for the Red Mass for those in the legal profession and for the White Mass for professional healthcare givers. Recently we chose our cathedral as the place where we issued a major pastoral letter on domestic violence. It is there that we regularly host blood drives

and provide space for voter registration. On September 11, 2001, our cathedral, like many of yours, was filled to overflowing for a Mass on that terrible day.

In the light of the critical times in which we live, the words of *Gaudium et Spes* continue to be relevant: “the world which the Council has in mind is the whole human family seen in the context of everything which envelops it; it is the world as the theater of human history, bearing the marks of its travail, its triumphs and failures.”<sup>ix</sup> In these words, the Council calls for dialogue, and if we ever needed dialogue, we need it now. In the aftermath of the September events of last year we recognize the great gaps that exist between all religious groups. For example, we immediately saw how little we know and understand Islam. We simply must reach better levels of understanding if we are to arrive at a more peaceful global situation. After all, God did make all of us equal and we relish being called daughters and sons of God, made in God’s image. This is common and holy ground and a good place to begin.

The following words from *Gaudium et Spes* reassure us in our own difficult times:

“...it is possible to create in every country the possibility of expressing the message of Christ in suitable terms, and to foster vital contact and exchange between the Church and different cultures. Nowadays when things change so rapidly and thought patterns differ so widely, the Church needs to step up this exchange ....it is the task of the whole people of God, particularly of its pastors and theologians, to listen to, and to distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of the divine word.”<sup>x</sup>

Besides the imperative for religious dialogue, there is also the political and economic challenges. We Americans have asked over and over, “Why do those people hate us?” We could not help but wonder, since we see ourselves as a great people, why others would seek

to destroy us, and the things that represent us. We saw how important it is for us to know history, not only from our perspective, but also from the perspective of other national, cultural and religious views. We see now how much we, as a nation and as a Christian Church, need to widen our understanding of our past and of our present in order to be able to confront the future.

My modest suggestion is that the cathedral is the ideal place where dialogue can be initiated and eventually celebrated. Just as those involved in the building of the great Gothic cathedrals reached reconciliation and peace as they worked on their monumental project, so the cathedral today can be the privileged place where dialogue can happen, good news be given and peace begin. Because of the nature of the cathedral, such dialogue would take on the characteristic of something not merely human, but indeed, sacred.

The synod on bishops, held last fall at the Vatican, pointed out that the bishop is a “weaver of unity and the father of the poor.” My plea on behalf of my brother bishops is that you who work in cathedral ministry, help us bishops to be bishops, and help all disciples to be disciples. You hold unique power and responsibility to make the Church and its shepherds, the bishops, credible. Your task is to demonstrate that the mission of the Church can be accomplished effectively. Your modeling of the Ministry of the Word, hospitality, outreach to the poor, efforts towards justice and peace and your collaborative ministry, and even the way you structure your administrative functions, contribute most powerfully to the Church’s witness. I remind my diocesan staff and others that the way we do things is as important as what we do. This means collaborating with others with the utmost respect and

attentiveness to one another's gifts and needs, in the spirit of *communio*. In this way you will assist us bishops in becoming true weavers of unity.

Most of us can truly say that our cathedrals do not reach the level of artistic genius and incredible inspiration of the Gothic cathedrals. Upon reading Robert Barron's literary and theological achievement, *Heaven in Stone and Glass*, one is in awe at the depth of faith in God that those Gothic masterpieces of stone and glass convey.

Going back to the time of their construction, there are several fundamental principles that we can learn that heighten the meaning and purpose of the mission of the Church, and make our work endure.<sup>xi</sup> We are all called to devote our lives to a cause we will never see completed and that is, the Reign of God.

I would like to share a story which I heard from Fr. Edmundo Rodríguez, S.J. The story goes like this: Once upon a time, there was a couple, a man and woman, window shopping at a mall. They noticed an unusual sight, a man with long hair, a beard, and wearing a long white robe. One told the other, "Is that who I think it is?" They approached the store, and sure enough, the sign over the store said, "The Jesus Store." They went inside and asked the man, "Are you the person we think you are?" "Yes, I am the Lord Jesus."

Jesus asked them if they wanted to buy anything, and they said they'd look around. It was one of those stores where you fill out the form to designate what items you'd like to purchase. The items around the store were labeled, "Peace," "Justice," "A Drug-free Society," "No Poverty," "No Domestic Violence," "No Unemployment." The couple chose a few things such as "Peace" and "No Homelessness." They brought their filled out form to

Jesus and asked Him how much it was. He said, “You have made some very good choices!”

He told them that these items were very expensive and gave them seeds. He said, “You go out and plant these seeds, take care of these seedlings, water them, nurture the plants. The fact is however, you will not see the results during your lifetime, even though you might work very hard at bringing these things to fulfillment. The couple got very discouraged and went away without the seeds.”

The fact that we will not see the results of our work in our lifetime should not diminish our dedication and tirelessness.

The vast majority of our dioceses cannot physically build cathedrals such as those in Chartres, Paris, and Milan; yet we are called to build cathedrals of another kind, those which can be monuments to human compassion and mercy. There are simply too many problems out there that affect children, the poor of this country and in the Third World, and innocent victims of war and terrorism. With a bit of human ingenuity and vision, we can begin to reallocate resources which will change the face of the earth. One of my colleagues in my diocese teaches the following, “We begin by taking care of what is needed. We can then move into what is possible, and before we know it, we are doing the impossible.”

To help us dream the impossible are the lessons left to us by the builders of the great cathedrals. They teach us to envision something that will endure, and that a great project requires the collaborative effort of everyone. They also teach us not to ignore what has gone on before, but to build on what others have done. What we produce has to be more than an

object of beauty and practicality. It has to pass on to future generations the stories and the values that most matter to us.

I believe we are all called to be “cathedral builders,” each of us contributing a stone here, a window there, together constructing something worthy of the plan of the Master Builder, the plan of God’s reign of justice, peace, and love. We are all called to use our gifted selves for the great design of God for the world. May God bless you as you continue to bring God’s message through your indispensable ministry.

## END NOTES

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