

One Body, Many Cultures: Evangelizing as African Catholics in the USA

*Keynote Address by The Most Reverend Jerome Feudjio
NAACUS 2025 Conference, Columbus, Ohio (July 19)
Theme: "United in Christ for Evangelization" (1 Cor 1:10–13)*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is with deep joy and gratitude that I stand before you today. I thank the leadership of NAACUS for this invitation and for the tremendous work you do in gathering, supporting, and empowering African Catholics across the United States. This conference is not just an event: it is a family reunion, a spiritual homecoming, and a missionary commissioning all at once.

As I look around this room, I see the beauty of Africa reflected in many faces, languages, and traditions. We come from different countries, cultures, and histories, but we are united in one faith, one baptism, and one Lord (cf. Eph 4:5). We are, as Saint Paul reminds us, "one body in Christ" (1 Cor 12:12), and that unity is the foundation of our mission.

In a small village in West Africa, a young boy once asked his grandfather, "Grandpa, why do we always gather under the big tree to tell stories?" The old man smiled and said, "Because under the tree, we are all the same height. The chief, the farmer, the child; we all sit on the ground and listen. That is how we remember who we are."

My brothers and sisters, this conference is our tree. We gather here not to boast, but to listen; to remember who we are as African Catholics, and to rediscover our mission in Christ.

In the thoughts I am about to share with you, we shall reflect on the theme of this conference, examine how we can evangelize through culture and witness, look at the challenges that face us as African Catholics here in the USA, and the opportunities they present, and then end by encouraging ourselves to spiritual maturity and mission, especially in this Year of Hope.

United in Christ: The Foundation of Evangelization

Let us take a moment to think about the theme: it is the central thought of our gathering here. The theme of this year's conference, **"United in Christ for Evangelization,"** is both timely and timeless. It is drawn from the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians. Paul is pleading with that community. Here is what the entire verse says: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought." (1 Cor 1:10). He was speaking to a Church that, like ours, was diverse, dynamic, and sometimes divided.

Unity is not about sameness. It is about communion. As Pope Saint John Paul II wrote in *Ecclesia in Africa*, the Church in Africa is called to be the “Family of God”. She is invited to be a family that celebrates diversity, fosters solidarity, and lives in harmony (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 63).

This image is deeply rooted in African culture, where family is not just a biological unit but a sacred bond of belonging, responsibility, and mutual care. In the African worldview, family includes the living, the dead, the unborn, the neighbor, and even the stranger. It is a space of identity, formation, and mission.

To speak of the Church as the Family of God is to affirm that we are not isolated individuals, but brothers and sisters bound together in Christ. It means that evangelization begins not with programs, but with relationships: relationships of love, trust, and solidarity.

This vision of the Church as family is especially relevant for us as African Catholics in the United States. We come from many nations, but we are one family. We speak many languages, but we share one faith. We carry many stories, but we walk one path, the path of Christ.

To be united in Christ is to recognize that we belong to one another. And to evangelize is to invite others into that belonging.

Following from this thought about unity and family as the bases for evangelization, let us think about how we can evangelize through our culture and witness. Evangelization is not just about preaching. It is about living. As the Popes have taught us, people today listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they listen to teachers, it is because they are first witnesses. (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41).

Someone once said, “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.” But if you want to make God dance, bring together African Catholics in prayer and praise!

Our African cultures are rich with ways of witnessing to the Gospel: through music that lifts the soul, through community that embraces the stranger, through reverence for elders, and through joy even in suffering. These are not just cultural traits; they are evangelical tools.

The Church, and all of us here present, must make the Gospel incarnate in the different cultures of the peoples (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 52). This is not about diluting the Gospel, but about allowing it to take root in the soil of our traditions. When we sing in our languages, dance in our liturgies, and tell stories that carry moral wisdom, we are not just preserving culture; we are proclaiming Christ.

In *Ecclesia in Africa*, the Holy Father affirms that “inculturation is the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity” and the “the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 59). This means that our cultures are not obstacles to the Gospel: they are bridges.

Think of the African concept of ***Ubuntu***, “I am because we are.” It reflects the Gospel truth that we are made for communion. Or the tradition of storytelling, which mirrors how Jesus taught in parables. Or the role of elders, who embody wisdom and continuity, much like the presbyters of the early Church. *Ubuntu*, therefore, is much like what St. Paul is saying in the verse from which our theme for this congress is drawn, and also his image of the Church as the “Body of Christ”.

So, let us not be shy about our culture. Let us wear it with pride, not as a costume, but as a calling. Let our music, our food, our languages, our family values, and our sense of community become instruments of evangelization.

And let us remember: the most powerful witness is not what we say, but how we live. When we forgive, when we serve, when we welcome, when we pray with joy, we preach the Gospel without words.

But let us be honest: the journey is not always easy. Evangelizing through our cultures can be very challenging. These difficulties can be varied.

Here are a few examples.

- Many of us have experienced the tension between preserving our African identity and integrating into American parish life. Sometimes we feel invisible. Sometimes our accents are misunderstood, our customs overlooked, or our gifts underused.
- Our youth, born or raised here, often feel caught between two worlds. They may not speak our languages or fully grasp our traditions. At times, they may not even feel at home in the Church.
- We also face racism, both subtle and overt, perhaps within the Church.

However, we must not be discouraged, because every challenge is also an opportunity. These obstacles are avenues that need our presence and witness, and challenge us to be firmer and stronger in the faith.

We have the opportunity to build bridges between generations, between cultures, between communities. We can continue to form vibrant African Catholic communities that are open, welcoming, and missionary. We can mentor our youth, celebrate our cultures, and serve our parishes with joy.

We remember the words of Pope Benedict XVI and make them ours, when he said that the Church in Africa – and we can add, the African Church in

the diaspora – is called to be a “witness to reconciliation, justice, and peace” (cf. *Africae Munus*, no. 14). That witness begins with us. And this is our calling here and now.

A Call to Spiritual Maturity and Mission

All that we have been saying is leading us to somewhere: yes, we are family, called to be united, to leverage our cultures in favor of Jesus Christ and the Gospel, to exploit the opportunities presented by our challenges here in the USA, but what does this mean for us gathered here at this conference?

My dear friends, NAACUS is more than an organization. It is a movement. A movement of faith, of culture, and of mission.

We are called to grow in spiritual maturity, to deepen our prayer lives, to support vocations, to form leaders, and to serve the Church with humility and courage.

To our young people: You are not the future of the Church, you are the Church now. Remember that your energy, creativity, and cultural pride are not distractions; they are gifts. Use them. Share them. Let your light shine (cf. *Christus Vivit*, nos. 187–201).

To our elders: your wisdom is needed. Your stories are sacred. Your example is powerful. Do not be afraid to lead.

Let me say a special word to those among us who are first-generation immigrants from Africa. You carry within you a deep well of traditions, stories, values, and spiritual instincts that have been shaped by centuries of lived faith in our homelands. Do not let go of those treasures. Preserve them not only as a heritage, but as instruments of grace. Your African identity is not a burden to be shed, but a gift to be shared. And just as importantly, teach these to your children. Tell them the stories of your people. Help them learn our languages, respect our elders, and understand the rhythms of our faith. Let them know that their African roots and their Catholic faith are not in conflict – they are, in fact, mutually enriching. In a culture that often prizes forgetfulness and detachment, be intentional about memory, about continuity, and about cultural pride rooted in Christ.

To all of us: let us be missionaries of hope. Let us evangelize not only with words, but with lives that radiate joy, compassion, and unity.

Conclusion and Blessing

My dear brothers and sisters, as we go through this conference and return to our communities, let us remember this: we are not just attendees of a conference; we are bearers of a mission. The Church in the United States needs your voice. It needs your joy. It needs your witness. And it needs your culture, not as something foreign, but as something deeply Catholic.

Let us go forth as one body, many cultures, united in Christ. Let us be the kind of Church that welcomes the stranger, uplifts the weary, and sings with joy even in the face of struggle. And when people ask, “Who are these African Catholics?” – let them see in us a people of faith, a people of hope, and a people of love.

May Our Lady of Africa walk with us. May the Holy Spirit empower us. And may the blessing of Almighty God, + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, come down upon you and remain with you forever.

Thank you, and may God bless you all.

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