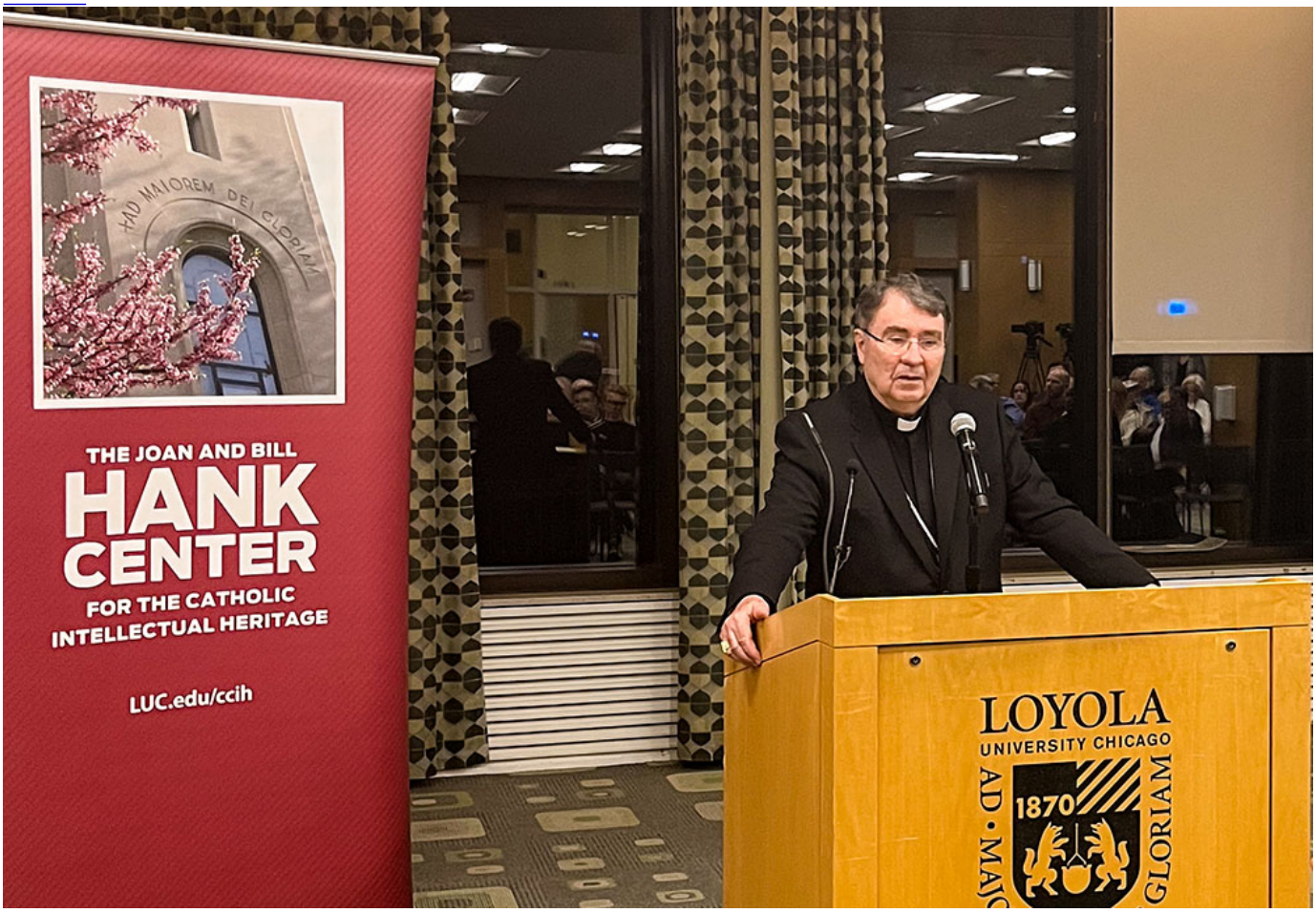
News




Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the U.S. papal nuncio, gives the Cardinal Bernardin lecture at Loyola University Chicago April 11. His talk was titled, "Pope Francis: Discernment and the Dialectic of Mercy." (Courtesy of Loyola University, Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage)



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Organizers and participants at this summer's eucharistic revival must "be careful not to lead ... with a polarized mentality," the Vatican's representative to the United States warned at an April 11 lecture at Loyola University Chicago.

The five-day, $14 million National Eucharistic Congress, scheduled for July 17-21 in Indianapolis, should instead be an opportunity for a "personal encounter with Christ," said Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the U.S. papal nuncio, who will be a keynote speaker at the event.

He noted that Jesus only instituted the Eucharist "after three years of encounter" with his disciples.

Pierre made his comments about the revival during the question-and-answer period following the annual Cardinal Bernardin Lecture sponsored by Loyola's Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage. His lecture was titled "Pope Francis: Discernment and the Dialectic of Mercy."

In the lecture, Pierre urged the church to "break free from ideological constraints" and avoid "adopting a defensive posture" in engaging with today's postsecularized society. The model of engagement should be Jesus, especially in his encounter with the Samaritan woman.

"There is an urgent need to find a language that will enable the church to proclaim the good news in this challenging context," Pierre said. That language, as Francis has said, must be the language of mercy.

This requires a conversion that "involves recognizing that our struggle to effectively bring Christ to people today is not solely due to society's increasing skepticism and secularization, but also because we have strayed from a genuine missionary posture," Pierre said.

Like the Samaritan woman at the well, the world's "tiredness" indicates an "existential crisis" among people today. This "weariness of the heart" is a "profound sense of dissatisfaction that undermines the very purpose of living, creating a people of outcasts who survive on the margins of existence but are incapable of living life to the fullest."

The "tiredness," with its disillusionment and lack of hope, can also be seen in the church, Pierre said. "Many are weary, there is stagnation in the work of evangelization, and discouragement in the face of opposition," he said, while still noting harbingers of "renewal in the small places."

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To effectively engage with modernity and discern the signs of the times, the church should follow the "see-judge-act" model epitomized by the 2007 meeting of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM) in Aparecida, Brazil, Pierre said.

Reform must come from particular personal encounters, especially on the peripheries, he said, noting that in every encounter, Jesus focuses on the individual person, "never with general abstractions or systems of thought."

Without such encounters, the church tends toward abstraction, which ultimately leads to the development of Christian ideologies. This, in turn, "almost inevitably begets forms of extremism, whether liberal or conservative."

"If the church struggles to evangelize today, if she cannot find the words to proclaim Christ, it is often because she has narrowed her focus to the occupation of spaces of authority," Pierre said. "The institutional church must guard against rigidity, against becoming crystallized in forms that obscure the discernment necessary for effective pastoral action."

Pierre cautioned against two problematic views of the church. The first, "a Christianity configured as a political ideology, focused mostly on the definition of moral norms, and training 'cultural warriors' for the defense of orthodoxy," which "does not correspond to the aspirations of the human heart."

"Similarly, a spirituality that harbors moral laxity and projects an almost nonconfessional outlook fails to fulfill the thirst for the divine."

This crisis precipitated by secularization also can be seen as an opportune time, a kairos moment, in which the church can recover a language of mercy that speaks to the weariness of the world, he said.

"The deepest longing of the human heart is indeed to love and to show mercy," he said. "Nothing else will truly satisfy."

Pierre also connected this "incarnational" approach to a synodal one, in which those in the church "listen without prejudice" and "encounter people by coming to their level."

During the question-and-answer session, he elaborated on the importance of synodality, which is necessary for evangelization in response to a "breakdown of transmission of the faith," he said.

The goal of synodality is not to reinvent the church, but to work together, he said, adding that the idea that all Catholics must think the same is a "false idea of what the church is."

"The church is not unanimity; it's communion," he said. "Communion is being able to work together with our differences."