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French Cardinal Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, proceeds into Mass in Rome April 21, 2024, to formally take possession of his titular church, the Church of St. Benedict Outside St. Paul's Gate. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)



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The Catholic Church in the United States is grappling with a tendency to become more "auto-referential" and withdraw itself from the international stage and universal church, Pope Francis' representative to the United States said.

Speaking with Catholic News Service before formally taking possession of his titular church in Rome April 21, Cardinal Christophe Pierre described the reality of the church in the United States as a "paradox." He said that while the U.S. church has "always been very faithful to the Holy Father," he also noted that "the difficulty in America, like in every country in a world which is globalized but becomes more and more individualistic, (is) to receive the message of the pope, especially to work together."

"The pope feels that if we don't work together, we are not a church," he stressed.

Pierre pointed to a growing "tendency to withdraw, to be more auto-referential," both in the United States and worldwide.

"We have to share our riches, our goods," particularly in an increasingly individualistic world, he told CNS. "And I see that as a challenge for the church."

The cardinal was in Rome to take possession of his titular church — the Church of St. Benedict Outside St. Paul's Gate — to seal his cardinal's identity as a member of the clergy of Rome. In ancient times, the cardinals who elected popes were pastors of the city's parishes.

The cardinal celebrated Mass in the Rome church joined by local parishioners, members of the Roman Curia, U.S. Cardinal James Harvey, ambassadors he has worked with over the course of his 47-year diplomatic career representing the Holy See and some 15 members of his family from the Brittany region of France.

Joe Donnelly, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, attended the liturgy and told CNS that Cardinal Pierre "has been a bridge that has helped to break down differences" between the United States and the Vatican, praising the cardinal for "trying to connect the American church with the Vatican."

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At the beginning of the Mass, French Xavière Missionary Sister Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, read aloud Francis' formal declaration from Sept. 20, 2023, granting Pierre the title and privileges of a cardinal and assigning him his titular church.

Four U.S. seminarians and two deacons studying at the Pontifical North American College in Rome served at the Mass.

In his homily, Pierre recalled how as a seminarian he initially thought his vocation was to remain a pastor in the diocese of his native Rennes, France, but that after almost 50 years of traveling the world in diplomatic service "the pope called me to give me a parish, the parish I never had."

He said that while a cardinal is a "universal figure" who can "float" between many roles, "the pope says 'no,' you should not float, quite the opposite, you should have deep roots in the church."

While representing the Holy See in nine countries on five continents, Pierre said he always found "a local church, a local country, a local culture."

"We encounter Christ in the church, and the church is not an idea, it is not a structure outside of our lives," he said. "The church is the presence of God in our existence."

The cardinal also reflected on the role of a nuncio as a missionary, and he said that the two words that highlight Francis' mission for the church are "encounter" and

"conversion."

"The work of a priest, of a missionary, is precisely to create this encounter, but not the encounter of myself with another person — the encounter of Christ through me or through the other person," he said, which "helps us make a conversion."

Prior to being sent to the United States in 2016, Pierre had postings as apostolic nuncio in Mexico, in Uganda and Haiti. He also served at Vatican diplomatic missions in Switzerland, Brazil, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and New Zealand.

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