

Presidential Address: “One in Christ: Communal Life Today”

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My Brothers, my fellow major superiors, and esteemed guests and friends in the mission of the Gospel of Christ, welcome.

As your President, it is my distinct honor and privilege and a humbling responsibility to stand before you today, to welcome you once again to our 2026 National Assembly here in Phoenix. It is a profound grace to offer this initial presidential address.

We are blessed to have our new Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, with us tomorrow, whose presence is a beautiful sign and reminder of our communion with our Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV and the universal Church.

We gather here under the hot desert sun of Arizona, a landscape that throughout monastic history has called people of faith into deeper contemplation, purification and renewal. We gather not merely as administrators or superiors, but as brothers united in our commitment to "**One in Christ: Communal Life Today.**"

We did not choose our theme because community life is easy. We chose it because it is the very core of who we are. In a world deeply wounded by polarization, loneliness, and institutional distrust, our prophetic witness is not found merely in what we *do*, but in how we *live together*.

It is easy to speak of being "**One in Christ**" when we are gathered in an assembly hall like this, surrounded by peers, buoyed by beautiful liturgy and mutual understanding. It is much harder when we return to our provinces and houses, where the reality of communal life today is often marked by aging populations, cultural fragmentation, diminished numbers, and the sheer exhaustion of maintaining institutional structures.

Yet, I suggest to you today that our communal life is not a luxury, nor is it merely a functional housing arrangement designed to cut down on living expenses while we do ministry.

Our communal life *is* our ministry. Of course, there are diverse ways of life that have differing emphasizes in their approaches to community life – societies of apostolic life approach it in one way, monastics another, institutes yet another. Nevertheless, community life is an essential component to all forms of religious life; it is a primary witness to a broken, polarized, and deeply lonely world.

In these next minutes, I want to unpack with you what it means to live communal life today—not the idealized community of our novitiate textbooks, but the real, gritty, Gospel-filled communities we are called to lead in 2026...as I said, acknowledging and recognizing our differing ways of living our religious callings.

We arrive at this venue at a unique, grace-filled moment in our history. Just weeks ago, some of us stood shoulder to shoulder alongside our brother bishops at the USCCB Plenary Assembly in Florida. Together, we participated in the historic consecration of our nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

That moment was not a mere formality or a passive liturgical rite. It was an intentional, profound anchor for our ministry. It reminded us that before we are administrators, before we are strategists and canonists, and before we are major superiors, we are men whose hearts are called to beat in unison with the Pierced Heart of Christ.

It is from that deeply anchored space that we pivot today. We gather here over these four days to look inward at our own houses, outward at a fractured world, and forward toward the future of religious life in the United States. We do so grounded entirely in our assembly theme: **"One in Christ: Communal Life Today."**

We gather at a time of "changing realities." We know the challenges we face: the aging of our membership, the complexity of vocations, the necessity of safeguarding vulnerable persons, and the heavy burdens of leadership.

Yet, as we engage with the Pre-Assembly focus on adult misconduct and the Post-Assembly focus on review boards, let us remember that these are not just

administrative tasks. They are acts of justice and protection, essential to our fidelity to the Gospel.

So let us begin our reflection by rooting ourselves in the scriptural blueprint of all common life, found in the Acts of the Apostles:

"The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common." (Acts 4:32)

This beautiful, striking image from the early Church is our North Star. It reminds us that our primary work this week is not to solve structural puzzles through human ingenuity alone, but to realign our communities with the apostolic fire that first gave birth to consecrated life.

As a son of Saint Norbert, I cannot help but view this scriptural mandate through the specific lens of our canonical heritage. In the Premonstratensian tradition, our entire life is modeled explicitly on that early Church in Jerusalem. We are called, by our very identity, to be of one mind and one heart on the way to God.

Saint Norbert recognized a fundamental truth that remains fiercely relevant for us in 2026: community is not a logistical arrangement. It is not an administrative

convenience designed to share expenses, pool ministry resources, or provide a convenient housing network for individual apostolates.

NO, Saint Norbert understood that communio itself is our primary apostolate. The way we love one another, the way we live together, and the way we forge unity out of diversity is the first and most powerful sermon we will ever preach.

This canonical vision draws its water directly from the wellspring of Saint Augustine. In the very opening sentence of his Rule, Augustine lays down the foundational law of our common life:

"The main reason for which you have come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God with one heart and one soul."

Notice the precise order of Augustine's thought. We do not come together simply to work harmoniously, or to manage ministries harmoniously. We come together to live harmoniously, and that harmony is maintained only when we are collectively intent upon God.

As major superiors, we know this is a magnificent theological ideal. We print it in our constitutions, we preach it during novitiate formations, and we quote it in our chapter documents. But we also know, with a clarity that sometimes weighs

heavily on our spirits, that the daily reality of implementing this vision is demanding, gritty, and costly.

In my own journey in religious leadership, I have come to realize that fostering authentic *communio* is not a task we can ever fully check off a list. It is not an executive achievement. It is a slow, daily, and often hidden surrender. It requires us to move far past the boundaries of mere functional leadership. It demands that we step out from behind our desks and into the messy, sacred role of spiritual fathers. We are called to be fathers who heal, fathers who listen deeply to the unspoken anxieties of our men, and fathers who are willing to bear the heavy, complicated burdens of our brothers.

During these days, I encourage you to look for the "**Resurrection hope**" in our discussions. Whether we are dialoguing about:

INTERGENERATIONALITY—bridging different eras of formation, balancing the wisdom of our elders with the distinct expectations of our younger brothers and the growing internationality of our communities; **OR**

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS—true communion requires us to address the mental, spiritual, and physical health of our members, ensuring our houses are places of restoration, not just centers of labor. We must ensure that managing the

institution does not suffocate the animation of the local community...we are building something that lasts.

If we are to be truly authentic in our reflection on communal life this week, we must look directly and courageously at the specific, heavy realities facing our men today. True communio cannot be built on pious platitudes; it must be forged in the crucible of truth. As major superiors, we are navigating an unprecedented cultural and ecclesiastical landscape. We must name the challenges that keep us awake at night.

FIRST, we must confront the modern crisis of isolation. We live in a hyper-connected digital world, yet our men are experiencing an unprecedented level of internal isolation. The sheer pressure of modern ministry—parishes that are expanding while clergy numbers diminish, complex administrative burdens, and the constant, draining noise of cultural polarization—can easily breed a dangerous sense of loneliness.

It is entirely possible for a man to live in a house full of his brothers, eat at the same table, pray the same Divine Office, and yet feel completely isolated in his struggles. We must prioritize the comprehensive mental, emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being of our brothers. Our friaries, priories, houses, and monasteries must be transformed into safe harbors. They must be spaces where

vulnerability is not viewed as a psychological failure or a lack of spiritual discipline, but where it is met with profound fraternal compassion, professional support, and unconditional Christ-like charity.

SECOND, we must look honestly at the landscape of vocation retention. In recent years, we have poured immense energy, creativity, and resources into vocation promotion—and praise God, young men are still responding to the radical call of Christ. But attracting vocations is only half the battle. Retaining them, nurturing them, and sustaining them across a lifetime of ministry require something much deeper: it requires robust, ongoing, authentic human formation.

The younger men entering our houses today come from a deeply fractured culture. They are searching, with an intense hunger, for stable, deep, and deeply prayerful community life. They are not looking for an ecclesiastical business corporation; they are looking for a spiritual family. If they enter our houses and find merely an association of polite individualists who live parallel lives under the same roof, they will leave.

If they find an environment where ministry performance is valued above personal holiness and fraternal relationship, their spirits will wither. We must ensure our formation programs build men who are capable of true relational intimacy, emotional maturity, and authentic fraternal accountability.

THIRD, we must acknowledge the sheer administrative exhaustion that accompanies our current structural transitions. We are managing rapidly shifting demographics. Many of our institutes are facing the complex, delicate realities of aging communities, the closure of historic patrimonies, and the consolidation of provinces. These structural realities require immense time, legal care, and financial oversight.

However, we must guard ourselves against a dangerous temptation: we cannot allow structural maintenance to paralyze our evangelical zeal. If we spend all our leadership energy acting as property managers, estate executors, and corporate administrators, we will starve the spiritual lives of the men we are called to shepherd. We must learn to delegate the temporal realities where appropriate, so that we can reclaim our primary vocation as pastors of the souls of our brothers.

How, then, do we navigate these overlapping crises? We do so by fundamentally reclaiming the true spirituality of religious leadership. In a secular corporate model, leadership is about power, leverage, optimization, and metrics. In the Kingdom of God, and specifically in consecrated life, leadership is an act of profound self-emptying. It is about cultivating communion at all costs.

To lead a community toward being genuinely **"One in Christ"** requires us, as major superiors, to be the first in all things difficult. We must be the first to listen

when we would rather speak. We must be the first to forgive when we have been misunderstood or unappreciated by our own men. We must be the first to serve in the hidden, unglamorous spaces of our communities.

Let us look again to the wisdom of Saint Augustine's Rule, where he speaks directly to the interior disposition of the superior:

"The superior, for his part, should not think himself happy in exercising authority, but in serving you in love. In your eyes he shall hold the first place by the dignity of his office, but in the presence of God he shall be as a footstool for you."

This is the radical inversion of gospel leadership. Our authority does not come from our titles or our canonical power; it comes from our willingness to be a footstool for our brothers, supporting them, lifting them up, and carrying them closer to Christ.

Our leadership must connect directly to the real human vulnerabilities of our men. We are tasked with creating a culture where good human formation is not something that ends on the day of final commitment or solemn profession, but is an ongoing, lifelong reality. We are called to foster environments where the distinct charism of each of our institutes is not treated as a relic in a museum, but is fully lived out with joy, adaptability, and missionary fire in the modern world.

As I reflect on our gathering, I am reminded of the image of the Cenacle at Pentecost—the Upper Room where the Apostles and Mary gathered, not merely as individuals but as a community receiving the Holy Spirit. This is the essence of our communal life: it is a witness, a foundational element that draws others to us, and a profound call to be truly **'One in Christ'**.

Brothers, the world outside these hotel walls is profoundly fractured. We see it every day in our news feeds, in our local neighborhoods, and even within the pews of our churches. Our culture is torn apart by bitter divisions, political tribalism, systemic loneliness, and a radical individualism that isolates the human heart.

It is precisely within this fractured cultural landscape that our vow of fraternal life becomes our most radical, counter-cultural, and prophetic witness. Our common life is an alternative narrative to the despair of the world. When men from completely different backgrounds, different generations, different cultures, and different theological and ecclesiological perspectives choose to live together, pray together, forgive one another, and serve together in unbreakable unity, we show the world a miracle.

We show them that Christ is real. We prove to a skeptical world that Jesus Christ actually has the power to break down the dividing walls of human hostility.

When we live our *communio* authentically, we become a living sign of the Kingdom of God. Our communities become places where people can look and say, "see how they love one another." that witness is far more attractive, far more evangelical, and far more powerful than any marketing campaign or strategic plan we could ever design.

What I have been reflecting on, brothers, deals primarily with the internal life of the community. Let me now look at some of the external context in which we live our communal life today.

As we gather this year, we are acutely aware that we stand at a unique historical threshold: the 250th anniversary of the founding of this nation and the 400 years of the ministry of religious men on this continent, let us do so with a clear-eyed honesty about our nation's past and the past histories of our religious communities.

Our country was formed by a complex interplay of faiths—a 'refugee civilization' rooted in the pursuit of freedom, yet often marred by the exclusion of those who did not fit the early mold, including the devastating impact of colonial policies on Indigenous brothers and sisters.

It is a moment that demands more than celebration; it demands a deep, honest audit of our conscience. Our religious communities were often born in the margins of

this history. For much of our country's development, Catholics were viewed with suspicion, regarded as outsiders who were 'dangerous until proven loyal'.

Yet, in the face of that exclusion, we chose to be builders. We built schools, hospitals, and parishes that became the bedrock of civic and social life in this country. We grew alongside the nation, moving from the periphery into the center of the American experiment...**and** even its sin of slavery and racism!

As religious, we recognize the shadows in our histories—the ways we have been complicit in unjust societal structures, and the times we have retreated into institutional comfort rather than prophetic witness.

Knowing our history about the sin of racism helps us to avoid it today: as our communities become more and more international and diverse, how adept are we at welcoming that cultural diversity **and** ensuring that our communities are bound by charism and fraternity, not divided by race and age?

We know that the Church has had to undergo a slow, painful growth in its understanding of the perennial truths of human dignity—an evolution that has not always been swift or consistent.

Our Holy Father Pope Leo XIV spoke of Gospel TRUTH this way in his encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*:

134- “The search for truth is an essential element of democracy, which is itself a means of contributing to the common good.” **And...**

237- “Let us remain faithful to the truth! Living amid incessant flows of information, opinions and images, we know how easy it can be to influence decisions and preferences through increasingly sophisticated algorithms. **And...**

218- In this context, it is imperative to cultivate hearts that love the truth, prefer what is right despite the most appealing content and pursue wisdom rather than immediate results. We must always keep before us the truth about God and humanity, just as Christ has revealed them to us.”

The Gospel tells us that Jesus speaks of himself as “the Way, the TRUTH, and the Life” (Jn 14:6); and Jesus saying that “the Father will send the Spirit of TRUTH, who will guide you to all TRUTH” (Jn 16:13), and Jesus’ prayer to the Father: “Consecrate them in the TRUTH, Your word is TRUTH” (Jn 17:17) and St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians “living in the TRUTH of love, Christ, brings about the body’s growth and builds itself up in love.” (Cf: Ep 4:15-16).

The Holy Fathers goes on to say: **26:** “This attitude of openness to truth, which is at the same time both one and diverse, profoundly expresses the catholicity of the Church, for she embraces the entire human family yet is also immersed in the concrete situations of peoples and cultures.”

And 27: “In light of the above, the Church’s Social Doctrine can be seen more authentically not as a handbook of principles and norms to be applied, but a process of shared discernment...born from the encounter between the eternal truth of the Gospel and the questions of history.”

Today, the 'political divide' we see in our country is not merely a secular issue; it is a spiritual one that hits close to home. We are witnessing a crisis of polarization that seeks to 'baptize domination' and 'sanctify cruelty'.

We are called to move beyond the exclusionary patterns of the past. Our mission, as men of faith, is to be architects of a true, radical unity in Christ—one that recognizes the dignity of every person and seeks to heal the divisions that have historically fragmented our society."

Our theme this year invites us to examine the very heartbeat of our vocation. Communal life is foundational to who we are, whether we serve in monastic communities or societies of apostolic life. As we have seen in our recent reflections and surveys, this life is our primary witness to the world. It is what draws candidates to our communities, and it is the soil in which our own spiritual lives are nourished.

Leadership and community life are opportunities for us to accompany one another in deepening our encounter with Christ. We know that in the day-to-day work of

administration, it is easy to get preoccupied by our own thoughts and concerns—much like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Yet, the joy of the Resurrection is the joy of hope. Our call as leaders is to be bearers of this hope, even when the path seems difficult.

We cannot speak of being "**One in Christ**" without reinforcing the sacred trust required to sustain that oneness. True fraternal life cannot exist where there is vulnerability or hidden pain. We must commit ourselves to the ongoing education of our review boards and the implementation of best practices in prevention. Transparency is not a legal burden; it is a spiritual necessity for an authentic community.

Our assembly is also a time for essential business—electing new leadership and setting our path forward. I urge you to participate fully in our regional meetings and elections. Our strength lies in our collaboration and our shared charisms. Let us hold one another in prayer as we deliberate, share, and break bread together this week. May our time here be one of genuine fellowship, renewing our spirits for the work that Christ has called us to do.

We are called to lead our brothers back to the center—the Eucharist, shared prayer, and vulnerable dialogue.

I invite you to open your hearts to where the Holy Spirit is guiding us—in discernment and in action—as we walk this road together.

Brothers, as we look to the days ahead in this National Assembly, let us not be overcome by a spirit of cynicism or defeatism. It is true that we face headwinds. It is true that the landscape of religious life in the United States is changing rapidly. But the Holy Spirit is not in retirement.

Brothers, while leadership can feel isolating, we do not journey alone. We are a communion within a larger communion. Let us return to our provinces, houses and monasteries enlivened by the Holy Spirit, ready to strengthen the fraternal bonds of the men entrusted to our care.

Thank you for your tireless dedication...and to all for their immense work in preparing this space for us. May our shared life be so visibly centered on CHRIST that the world looks at us and sees a living alternative to division.

May God bless our conversations in our days together, may He heal our fractures, and may He make us truly **“One in Christ”** for the life of the world...

Pax et fraternitas...