

Pope Francis speaks as a pastor to U.S. bishops

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WASHINGTON (RNS) In a deeply personal talk that blended poetry and a new set of marching orders for the U.S. hierarchy, Pope Francis on Wednesday (September 23) told U.S. bishops to reject “harsh and divisive language” and to reach out to the world, especially those in need.

The bishops, he said, should embrace an approach “which attracts men and women through the attractive light and warmth of love.”

Their mission, Francis told some 300 bishops gathered for noonday prayer in St. Matthew’s Cathedral, “is not about preaching complicated doctrines, but joyfully proclaiming Christ, who died and rose for our sake.”

“I cannot ever tire of encouraging you to dialogue fearlessly,” Francis told them, repeatedly stressing the word *dialogue* and urging them to be “promoters of the culture of encounter.”

“Otherwise,” he said, “we fail to understand the thinking of others, or to realize deep down that the brother or sister we wish to reach and redeem, with the power and the closeness of love, counts more than their positions, distant as they may be from what we hold as true and certain.”

“Harsh and divisive language,” he continued, “does not befit the tongue of a pastor, . . . although it may momentarily seem to win the day, only the enduring allure of goodness and love remains truly convincing.”

The talk was vintage Francis, an Argentine-born pope who has stressed his role as a pastor, and who has upended many expectations of what the church should be.

He has focused on reaching out to the poor and marginalized, on being a merciful and inclusive church. He has also highlighted protecting the environment and advocating for immigrants, as much as opposing abortion and other hot-button issues normally associated with a Catholicism that he has said is too often focused on “small-minded rules” and abstract theological ideas and disputes.

That radically pastoral and personal orientation has won him admirers across the spectrum and made this six-day visit to Washington, New York and Philadelphia, his first ever to the U.S., a media sensation with great political implications.

But Francis has also unsettled, and frequently upset, many American bishops who have spent decades following the more conservative doctrinal course set by St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, Francis’ immediate predecessor.

Numerous prelates have expressed serious reservations about Francis, saying he has “confused” them, and the faithful, with his new style. Some of his harshest critics worry that he is leading the church into schism or heresy.

The critics would not have been comforted by the pope’s talk on Wednesday.

While Francis assured the bishops that he did “not come to judge you or to lecture you,” his remarks left little doubt that he wanted them to set a new course away from the culture warrior path they have followed in recent years—focusing on fights against abortion and gay marriage, for example—and toward a more balanced approach that reaches out to all who are in need.

“Bishops need to be lucidly aware of the battle between light and darkness being fought in this world,” Francis said, speaking in Italian rather than his native Spanish. “Woe to us, however, if we make of the cross a banner of worldly struggles and fail to realize that the price of lasting victory is allowing ourselves to be wounded and consumed.

“We cannot let ourselves be paralyzed by fear,” the pope continued. “I know that you face many challenges, that the field in which you sow is unyielding and that there is always the temptation to give in to fear, to lick one’s wounds, to think back on bygone times and to devise harsh responses to fierce opposition.”

He said the bishops must “flee the temptation of narcissism, which blinds the eyes of the shepherd, makes his voice unrecognizable and his actions fruitless.”

In a concrete sign of how Francis wants the bishops to proceed, he mentioned the “seamless garment” idea that sees Catholic teachings and the church’s witness as all of a piece rather than singling out one or two issues, such as abortion, which had been the prevailing policy of the Vatican and the American bishops.

Instead, Francis listed all the ills that the bishops must address: “The innocent victim of abortion, children who die of hunger or from bombings, immigrants who drown in the search for a better tomorrow, the elderly or the sick who are considered a burden, the victims of terrorism, wars, violence and drug trafficking, the environment devastated by man’s predatory relationship with nature.”

Francis also raised the sensitive topic of the clergy sexual abuse crisis but did so to praise bishops for taking firm steps “without fear of self-criticism and at the cost of mortification and great sacrifice.”

“I have supported your generous commitment to bring healing to victims in the knowledge that in healing we too are healed and to work to ensure that such crimes will never be repeated.”

Though Francis has done more than his predecessors to hold bishops accountable for failing to protect children, survivors groups in the U.S. have blasted Francis and the American hierarchy for not doing much more. They have criticized plans—so far not publicly confirmed—for the pontiff to meet with abuse survivors at some point during his visit, which concludes Sunday.

Throughout the address, however, Francis was also strikingly personal and affecting.

The 78-year-old pope, who has often suggested that he would not have a long papacy, said he was speaking “as the Bishop of Rome, called by God in old age, and from a land which is also American, to watch over the unity of the universal Church and to encourage in charity the journey of all.”

“May no member of Christ’s Body and the American people feel excluded from the pope’s embrace,” he said. “Whenever a hand reaches out to do good or to show the love of Christ, to dry a tear or bring comfort to the lonely, to show the way to one who is lost or to console a broken heart, to help the fallen or to teach those thirsting for truth, to forgive or to offer a new start in God . . . know that the pope is at your side and supports you.

“He puts his hand on your own, a hand wrinkled with age, but by God’s grace still able to support and encourage.”