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Remarks and notes from Bishop William A. Wack, CSC taken at the U.S. Bishops' retreat, held January 2 – 8, 2019

The U.S. Catholic Bishops' retreat, held at Mundelein Seminary in January 2019, was an extraordinary event in many ways. Whereas the bishops normally attend annual retreats within their various regions, Pope Francis strongly encouraged that all bishops should come together for several days of reflection and prayer. This came about because of the clergy sexual abuse revelations and the crisis of credibility facing the Catholic Church in the United States. Pope Francis initially expressed an interest in joining the bishops in Chicago for the retreat, but because of logistics and scheduling concerns, he was not able to join us. However, the Holy Father did two things to strengthen our communion: First, he sent the Papal Preacher, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., to lead the retreat. Fr. Cantalamessa has served the last three popes as the Papal Preacher and spiritual advisor to the Curia. Secondly, Pope Francis sent each of the bishops a letter in which he expressed his brotherly affection and at the same time urged each of the bishops to eschew any taint of privilege and power, and to embrace humility and the desire to serve in our role as shepherds.

Fr. Cantalamessa spoke a great deal about the role of the Holy Spirit in creation – in the creation of the world, in the creation of the Church, and in the re-creation of each soul. Just as the Spirit hovered over the waters at creation and created order out of chaos, the Spirit does the same thing for each person who asks for it today. The Holy Spirit guides us to a more perfect faith in Christ Jesus. The Spirit teaches us and reminds us of everything that Jesus taught. The Holy Spirit defends us from evil and leads us from darkness to light. The Holy Spirit helps us to say "Yes" to God as Mary did.

Thus we began the retreat (and every day) reflecting on the ancient hymn: *Veni Creator Spiritus*. Every conclave, every synod, every gathering of bishops, every ordination, even every year begins with this hymn. Come, Creator Spirit.

The following are from my notes. They are not complete, as I tried to write these down while listening intently to the talks. I offer them so that you can get a glimpse into the nature of our retreat – and that you can grow in humility, prayer, and in your devotion to the Holy Spirit.

- We need to ask ourselves: Is Jesus for me a person or a personality? Is Jesus real for me, or is he a celebrity or cult figure?
- As bishops, feeling Jesus' presence must be an absolute priority. He said, "I am with you always." Do we believe this?
- Prayer is an indispensable means for cultivating a relationship with Jesus Christ. Pray in order to know what to do; not just before doing something you think you should do. "Give back the power to God! Give back the power to God! We must let God guide us and direct us in serving as shepherds in the Church."
- We have to deny ourselves again and again. Put off your sinful nature and let God's glory shine through you. (Reconciliation/Confession is absolutely vital in doing this.)
- "Being a bishop used to be an honor; now it is a burden."

- “In some ways, this is a golden age for the Church, because the focus is not so much on governing a specific territory, as much as it is on serving the people in your charge.”
- “We must preach and talk about eternity!” Secularization means putting everything in the context of time. All evils can be traced to this: focusing only on the here-and-now.
- The love of money is the root of all evil. Christ not only recognized the power money has over people; he crushed it.
- Our model for holiness is Mary, the Mother of God. She proclaims the *Magnificat* because she sees with a new perspective.
- At the end of Jesus’ life on earth, the apostles were in disarray. But when the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, a profound change occurred. Once again, God’s Spirit brings order out of chaos. The Holy Spirit does this again and again in creation, and can do it today.
- The **Gospel** is what is to be proclaimed, and the Holy Spirit is the method, the medium. But what is “Gospel”? It is the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is, essentially, CHRIST. As St. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians: “We preach Christ, and him crucified.” We must proclaim Christ today. Our preaching should lead people to an inner conversion, so that God’s people may know that Jesus Christ is Lord.
- In the 5th verse of *Veni Creator Spiritus*, we ask that God keep us from anything that is evil, and that God protect us. “With you at our side, we will avoid anything noxious.”
- Bishops are shepherds of the flock. Jesus to Peter: “Feed my sheep.” In the Bible, we see that shepherds are God’s representatives on earth. However, they did not always act uprightly. The prophet Ezekiel warns against false and bad shepherds, who are concerned only about their own well-being.
- We are all sinners, but this is precisely what enables us to be faithful: we receive mercy and forgiveness from God (if we ask for it and are repentant), and then we proclaim that mercy to others. Hebrews: Every high priest is able to deal patiently with sinners, for he himself is beset by weakness.” How true that passage is for us bishops today.
- Prayer must be at the heart of the life of the bishop. We intercede for the people: Jesus, in the Gospel of John: “I pray not only for them but also for those who will believe in me through their word.”
- Love the people entrusted to you. This is the key to success in pastoral care. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son....” Why did Jesus come and preach and teach and heal and give his life for us? Love.
- The role of the Apostles is to witness to the Resurrection of Jesus. How are we bishops – successors to the Apostles – called to do this today? We do this by preaching **HOPE**. St. Paul: God gave us a living hope in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.
- St. Augustine: The face of Christians is the Resurrection of Christ. In the Resurrection, God the Father vouches for His Son. On the cross, Jesus says to the Father: “Amen!” In the Resurrection, the Father says to the Son: “Amen!”
- “The rebirth of hope is the one thing that the Catholic Church in the United States needs right now.” This is a resurrection of the heart.
- Hope is not acquired through mental or physical work. As a theological virtue, it is a gift from God. If we are ready for it, God will give us hope.
- If we can bring about a rebirth of hope in pastors, this retreat will have been successful.
- Conclude with words from the prophet Haggai: Take courage, you people! And work, because I am with you, says the Lord. “Dear brother Bishops, take courage. God is with you. God is with you.”