Much of what I say today you probably already know. But that doesn’t prevent a good discussion, so I hope you’ll bear with me.

As I sat down to write my talk last week, a friend emailed me a copy of a manuscript illustration from the 13th century. It’s a picture of Mary punching the devil in the nose. She doesn’t rebuke him. She doesn’t enter into a dialogue with him. She punches the devil in the nose. So I think that’s the perfect place to start our discussion.

When most Catholics think about Mary, we have one of two images in our heads: the virginal Jewish teen from Galilee who says yes to God’s plan; or the mother of Jesus, the woman of mercy and tenderness, “our life, our sweetness and our hope.” We can too easily forget that Mary is also the woman clothed in the sun who crushes the head of the serpent. She embodies in her purity the greatness of humanity fully alive in God. She’s the mother who intercedes for us, comforts us and teaches us — but who also defends us.

And in doing that, she reminds us of the great line from C.S. Lewis that Christianity is a “fighting religion” – not in the sense of hatred or violence directed at other persons, but rather in the spiritual struggle against the evil in ourselves and in the world around us, where our weapons are love, justice, courage and self-giving.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem described our spiritual struggle this way: “There is a serpent [the devil] by the wayside watching those who pass by: beware lest he bite thee with unbelief. He sees so many receiving salvation and is seeking whom he may devour.” The great American writer Flannery O’Connor added that whatever form the serpent may take, “it is of this mysterious passage past him, or into his jaws, that stories of any depth will always be concerned to tell, and this being the case, it requires considerable courage at any time, in any country,” not to turn away from God’s story or the storyteller.

If our theme as a meeting this week is reclaiming the Church for the Catholic imagination, we can’t overlook the fact that the flesh and blood model for our Church – Mary as mater et magistra – is quite accomplished at punching the devil in the nose. And as Mary’s adopted sons, we need to be bishops who lead and teach like the great Cyril of Jerusalem.

Having said all that, my thoughts today come in three parts. I want to speak first about the people we’ve become as American Catholics. Then I’ll turn to how and why we got where we are. Finally I’ll suggest what we need to do about it, not merely as individuals, but more importantly as a Church. We need to recover our identity as a believing community. And I think a good way to begin doing that is with the “catechetical content” of our current political moment.
My focus today isn’t politics. And I won’t waste our time weighing one presidential candidate against the other. I’ve already said elsewhere that each is a national embarrassment, though for different reasons. But politics involves the application of power, and power always has a moral dimension. So we can’t avoid dealing with this election at least briefly. Here’s what I find curious. Given Mr. Trump’s ugly style and the hostility he sparks in the media, Mrs. Clinton’s lead should be even wider than it is. But it’s not. And there’s a lesson in that. It’s this. Even many people who despise what Mr. Trump stands for seem to enjoy his gift for twisting the knife in America’s leadership elite and their spirit of entitlement, embodied in the person of Hillary Clinton.

Americans aren’t fools. They have a good sense of smell when things aren’t right. And one of the things wrong with our country right now is the hollowing out and retooling of all the key words in our country’s public lexicon; words like democracy, representative government, freedom, justice, due process, religious liberty and constitutional protections. The language of our politics is the same. The content of the words is different. Voting still matters. Public protest and letters to members of Congress can still have an effect. But more and more of our nation’s life is governed by executive order, judicial overreach and administrative agencies with little accountability to Congress.

People feel angry because they feel powerless. And they feel powerless because in many ways they are. When Tocqueville wrote Democracy in America, he assumed that only two basic social structures were possible in the modern era, democracy and aristocracy. Because of its mass appeal, democracy would be the winner. Once we assume that power flows from the people, the ordinary citizen, not some self-styled nobility, obviously has the right to rule. Or at least that’s the theory. Reality is more complex. Tocqueville noted that even in America, both “aristocratic [and] democratic passions are found at the bottom of all parties.” These passions might be hidden from view. But they’re very much alive and well. It’s worth noting that aristoi is just the Greek word for “the best,” and in practice, social elites come in all shapes and sizes.

The 2016 election is one of those rare moments when the repellant nature of both presidential candidates allows the rest of us to see our nation’s pastoral terrain as it really is. And the view is unpleasant. America’s cultural and political elites talk a lot about equality, opportunity and justice. But they behave like a privileged class with an authority based on their connections and skills. And supported by sympathetic media, they’re remaking the country into something very different from anything most of us remember or the Founders imagined.

The WikiLeaks email release last week from the Clinton entourage says a lot about how the merit-class elite views people like those in this room. It’s not friendly.

But what does any of this have to do with our theme? Actually quite a lot. G.K. Chesterton once quipped that America is a nation that thinks it’s a Church. And he was right. In fact, he was more accurate than he could have guessed. Catholics came to this country to build a new life. They did exceptionally well here. They’ve done so well that by now many of us Catholics are largely assimilated to, and digested by, a culture that bleaches out strong religious convictions in
the name of liberal tolerance and dulls our longings for the supernatural with a river of practical atheism in the form of consumer goods.

To put it another way, quite a few of us American Catholics have worked our way into a leadership class that the rest of the country both envies and resents. And the price of our entry has been the transfer of our real loyalties and convictions from the old Church of our baptism to the new “Church” of our ambitions and appetites. People like Nancy Pelosi, Anthony Kennedy, Joe Biden and Tim Kaine are not anomalies. They’re part of a very large crowd that cuts across all professions and both major political parties.

During his years as bishop of Rome, Benedict XVI had the talent of being very frank about naming sin and calling people back to fidelity. Yet at the same time he modeled that fidelity with a kind of personal warmth that revealed its beauty and disarmed the people who heard him. He spoke several times about the “silent apostasy” of so many Catholic laypeople today and even many priests; and his words have stayed with me over the years because he said them in a spirit of compassion and love, not rebuke.

Apostasy is an interesting word. It comes from the Greek verb apostanai – which means to revolt or desert; literally “to stand away from.” For Benedict, laypeople and priests don’t need to publicly renounce their baptism to be apostates. They simply need to be silent when their Catholic faith demands that they speak out; to be cowards when Jesus asks them to have courage; to “stand away” from the truth when they need to work for it and fight for it.

It’s a word to keep in mind in examining our own hearts and hearts of our people. And while we do that, we might reflect on what assimilating has actually gained for us when Vice President Biden conducts a gay marriage, and Senator Kaine lectures us all on how the Church needs to change and what kind of new creature she needs to become.

So how did we get to this moment, and when did the process begin?

I suppose 1960 is a good place to date the start of our current troubles. That’s when candidate John Kennedy promised Houston Baptist ministers that – if elected -- he’d keep his Catholic faith separate from his presidential leadership. Or we could use 1984 as a start date. That’s when Mario Cuomo gave his widely praised but finally incoherent defense of Kennedy’s approach to public life – the “I’m personally opposed to evils like abortion, but” tactic -- as he received the Laetare Medal here at Notre Dame.

Or we could use 1962 as another reasonable start date. That’s when President Kennedy told a group of policy advisers that “The fact of the matter is that most of the problems, or at least many of them that we now face, are technical problems . . . administrative problems. They are very sophisticated judgments which do not lend themselves to the great sort of ‘passionate movements’ which have stirred this country so often in the past. Now they deal with questions which are beyond the comprehension of most men.”

That last Kennedy line – describing our problems as “beyond the comprehension of most men” – sums up the spirit of today’s leadership classes. Briefly put, their message is this: “Smart people
should run things, and most people aren’t smart enough to qualify. But the country shouldn’t worry as long as the really smart people like us – in other words, the technologically and managerially gifted -- stay in charge. So don’t rock the boat with a lot of useless noise from the deplorables.”

In effect, technology and its comforts are now our substitute horizon for the supernatural. Technology gets results. Prayer, not so much – or at least not so immediately and obviously. So our imaginations gradually bend toward the horizontal, and away from the vertical.

Religion can still have value in this new dispensation by helping credulous people do socially useful things. But religion isn’t “real” in the same way that science and technology are real. And if, as John Kennedy said, our main social problems today are practical and technical, then talking about heaven and hell starts to sound a lot like irrelevant voodoo. The Church of our baptism is salvific. The Church where many Americans really worship, the Church we call our popular culture, is therapeutic.

Let me put our situation this way. The two unavoidable facts of life are mortality and inequality. We’re going to die. And – here I’m committing a primal American heresy -- we’re *not* created “equal” in the secular meaning of that word. We’re obviously *not* equal in dozens of ways: health, intellect, athletic ability, opportunity, education, income, social status, economic resources, wisdom, social skills, character, holiness, beauty or anything else. And we never will be. Wise social policy can ease our material inequalities and improve the lives of the poor. But as Tocqueville warned, the more we try to enforce a radical, unnatural, egalitarian equality, the more “totalitarian” democracy becomes.

For all its talk of diversity, democracy is finally monist. It begins by protecting the autonomy of the individual but can easily end by eliminating competing centers of authority and absorbing civil society into the state. Even the family, seen through secular democratic eyes, can be cast as inefficient, parochial and a potential greenhouse of social problems. Parental authority can become suspect because it escapes the scrutiny and guidance of the state. And the state can easily present itself as better able to educate the young because of its superior resources and broader grasp of the needs of society.

Clearly our civil liberties and our equality before the law are hugely important premises for a decent society. They’re vital principles for our common public life. But they’re also purely human constructs, and in a sense, fictions.

What Christians mean by “freedom” and “equality” is very different from the secular content of those words. For the believer, freedom is more than a menu of choices or the absence of oppression. Christian freedom is the liberty, the knowledge and the character to do what’s morally right. And the Christian meaning of “equality” is much more robust than the moral equivalent of a math equation. It involves the kind of love a mother feels for each of her children, which really isn’t equality at all. A good mother loves her children *infinitely and uniquely* -- not “equally,” because that would be impossible. Rather, she loves them *profoundly* in the sense that all of her children are flesh of her flesh, and have a permanent, unlimited claim on her heart.
So it is with our Catholic understanding of God. Every human life, no matter how seemingly worthless, has infinite dignity in his eyes. Every human life is loved without limits by the God who made us. Our weaknesses are not signs of unworthiness or failure. They’re invitations to depend on each other and become more than ourselves by giving away our strengths in the service of others, and receiving their support in return. This is the truth in the old legend about heaven and hell. Both have exactly the same tables. Both have exactly the same rich foods. But the spoons in both places are much too long. In hell people starve because they try to feed themselves. In heaven they thrive because they feed each other.

For all of its greatness, democratic culture proceeds from the idea that we’re born as autonomous, self-creating individuals who need to be protected from, and made equal with, each other. It’s simply not true. And it leads to the peculiar progressive impulse to master and realign reality to conform to human desire, whereas the Christian masters and realigns his desires to conform to and improve reality.

I want to turn now in my last few minutes to what we need to do.

Talks like mine today are always a mixed experience. In describing a hard time, the words can easily sound dark and distressing. That’s not my intention at all. Optimism and pessimism are twin forms of self-deception. We need instead to be a people of hope, which means we don’t have the luxury of whining.

There’s too much beauty in people and in the world to let ourselves become bitter. And by reminding us of that in The Joy of the Gospel, his first apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis gives us a great gift. One of his strongest qualities -- and I saw this at the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia -- is his power to inspire confidence and joy in people while speaking candidly about the problems we face in a suffering world.

Serenity of heart comes from consciously trying to live on a daily basis the things we claim to believe. Acting on our faith increases our faith. And it serves as a magnet for other people. To reclaim the Church for the Catholic imagination, we should start by renewing in our people a sense that eternity is real, that together we have a mission the world depends on, and that our lives have consequences that transcend time. Francis radiated all these things during his time in Philadelphia.

If men and women are really made for heroism and glory, made to stand in the presence of the living God, they can never be satisfied with bourgeois, mediocre, feel-good religion. They’ll never be fed by ugly worship and shallow moralizing. But that’s what we too often give them. And the reason we do it is because too many of us have welcomed the good news of Vatican II without carving its demand for conversion onto the stone of our hearts. In opening ourselves to the world, we’ve forgotten our parts in the larger drama of our lives -- salvation history, which always, in some way, involves walking past St. Cyril’s serpent.

In Philadelphia I’m struck by how many women I now see on the street wearing the hijab or even the burqa. Some of my friends are annoyed by that kind of “in your face” Islam. But I
understand it. The *hijab* and the *burqa* say two important things in a morally confused culture: “I’m not sexually available;” and “I belong to a community different and separate from you and your obsessions.”

I have a long list of concerns with the content of Islam. But I admire the integrity of those Muslim women. And we need to help Catholics recover their own sense of distinction from the surrounding secular meltdown. The Church and American democracy are very different kinds of societies with very different structures and goals. They can never be fully integrated without eviscerating the Christian faith. An appropriate “separateness” for Catholics is already there in the New Testament. We’ve too often ignored it because Western civilization has such deep Christian roots. But we need to reclaim it, starting now.

Catholics today – and I’m one of them -- feel a lot of unease about declining numbers and sacramental statistics. Obviously we need to do everything we can to bring tepid Catholics back to active life in the Church. But we should never be afraid of a smaller, lighter Church if her members are also more faithful, more zealous, more missionary and more committed to holiness. Making sure that happens is the job of those of us who are bishops.

Losing people who are members of the Church in name only is an imaginary loss. It may in fact be more honest for those who leave and healthier for those who stay. We should be focused on commitment, not numbers or institutional throw-weight. We have nothing to be afraid of as long as we act with faith and courage.

We need to speak plainly and honestly. Modern bureaucratic life, even in the Church, is the enemy of candor and truth. We live in an age that thrives on the subversion of language. And here’s one example. “Accompaniment,” when Pope Francis uses the word, is a great and obvious good. Francis rightly teaches us the need to meet people where they are, to walk with them patiently, and to befriend them on the road of life. But the same word is widely misused by others. *Where the road of life leads* does make a difference -- especially if it involves accompanying someone over a cliff.

Here’s another example: A theologian in my own diocese recently listed “inclusivity” as one of the core messages of Vatican II. Yet to my knowledge, that word “inclusivity” didn’t exist in the 1960s and appears nowhere in the council documents.

If by “inclusive” we mean patiently and sensitively inviting all people to a relationship with Jesus Christ, then yes, we do very much need to be inclusive. But if “inclusive” means including people who do not believe what the Catholic faith teaches and will not reform their lives according to what the Church holds to be true, then inclusion is a form of lying. And it’s not just lying but an act of betrayal and violence against the rights of those who do believe and do seek to live according to God’s Word. Inclusion requires conversion and a change of life; or at least the sincere desire to change.

Saying this isn’t a form of legalism or a lack of charity. It’s simple honesty. And there can be no real charity without honesty. We need to be very careful not to hypnotize ourselves with our words and dreams. The “new evangelization” is fundamentally not so different from the “old
evangelization.” It begins with personal witness and action, and with sincere friendships among committed Catholics -- not with bureaucratic programs or elegant sounding plans. These latter things can be important. But they’re never the heart of the matter.

When I was ordained a bishop, a wise old friend told me that every bishop must be part radical and part museum curator – a radical in preaching and living the Gospel, but a protector of the Christian memory, faith, heritage and story that weave us into one believing people over the centuries.

I try to remember that every day. Americans have never liked history. The reason is simple. The past comes with obligations on the present, and the most cherished illusion of American life is that we can remake ourselves at will. But we Christians are different. We’re first and foremost a communion of persons on mission through time – and our meaning as individuals comes from the part we play in that larger communion and story.

If we want to reclaim who we are as a Church, if we want to renew the Catholic imagination, we need to begin, in ourselves and in our local parishes, by unplugging our hearts from the assumptions of a culture that still seems familiar but is no longer really “ours.” It’s a moment for courage and candor, but it’s hardly the first moment of its kind.

This is why Mary – the young Jewish virgin, the loving mother, and the woman who punches the devil in the nose – was, is, and always will be the great defender of the Church. And so we can say with confidence: Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us. And St. Cyril of Jerusalem, patron of bishops, be our model and brother in our service to Mary’s son, Jesus Christ.

So be it: Amen.