

Good afternoon.

It is a joy to be with you today. Thank you for inviting me to share a few reflections.

For those who do not know me, my name is Jorge Leone. I serve as a mission developer in the communities of faith of Cristo Rey, Sagrada Familia, and our preaching points. I have served the South Carolina Lutheran Church and these communities since 2008.

Cristo Rey continues to grow; every month we celebrate new baptisms. Parents and godparents attend the courses we offer, learn Luther's Small Catechism, and participate in Bible studies. The same is true for our First Communion candidates and those in discipleship formation.

Every Sunday, for more than a year and a half, around forty of them gather to learn more about God's Word and about loving our neighbor. Youth and adults alike are being formed in a strong Lutheran identity.

Our community is deeply committed to the church. They care for the gardens, maintain the building, and beautify the sanctuary, offering their gifts and identity as a generous act of love to God. They organize activities, celebrate birthdays at church, and joyfully

wait for the community to sing *Las Mañanitas*, a Latino birthday song.

For Epiphany, Easter, and many other occasions, everyone brings gifts and food—special dishes prepared with love. And as you know, when food is cooked with love, it is always delicious.

Our communities also show generosity without limits. When someone faces illness, a death, detention, incarceration, deportation, or financial hardship, the community responds with special offerings—money, food, and accompaniment.

We have many children—the future of the church. To give you an idea, for Epiphany we prepared 120 gifts for them.

Let me now share a bit more about myself and my family.

I am an immigrant, like the ancestors of most of you—except for Native Americans, the original peoples of this land.

My family is European: my father was born in northern Italy and was Roman Catholic; on my mother's side, we are French and Swiss, Calvinists from the beginning. I was educated in Jesuit and Augustinian schools.

My wife was born in Colombia. Her father had traveled with his family to Buenos Aires on a diplomatic mission.

Elizabeth and I met while studying architecture at the university. We fell in love, married in Colombia, and returned to Argentina to finish our studies.

Our first four children were born in Argentina; our fifth was born in Ecuador.

My family and I lived our own exodus. We left Argentina during the so-called Dirty War, a military dictatorship in which 30,000 people were disappeared, tortured, and murdered.

We lived and worked in Colombia, then in Ecuador, where our youngest daughter, Mariana, was born.

With the support of the Ecuadorian government, we moved to Spain to work in a development and artisan export program.

Years later, we received a call from the U.S. embassy: our residency visa had been approved. Once again, we packed part of our belongings into a container and arrived in South Carolina.

Here I became part of Cristo Rey, founded by my son, Dr. Andrés Leone. I studied at Southern Seminary and later at Pacific Lutheran Seminary in California.

In 2013 I became a synodically authorized pastor serving Cristo Rey and Sagrada Familia, and in 2017 I became the first Latino pastor ordained in the South Carolina Synod.

I will continue serving until God—and my wife—tell me it is time to retire.

Since my youth, alongside the jobs that sustained us, I was always involved in social ministry: supporting poor schools, providing breakfast, shoes, and supplies for children; working with street children, Indigenous communities, social development projects, and nonprofit organizations.

That was my calling: to serve the most vulnerable.

I believe that my exodus—ours as a family—was a path of teaching and preparation, much like the exodus of Israel. It took years for them to reach the promised land—years necessary to be ready for the place God had chosen for them.

I have so much to thank God for: a wonderful family, strong and stable faith communities that I serve with joy—communities where people arrive and feel welcomed, embraced with love and friendship.

God has always been with us.

Even in the darkest moments, when fear and uncertainty filled my heart, the Lord was present. When a door closed and I did not know where to go, He opened a window so I could move forward.

The Lord never abandoned us. He guided us. He provided for our needs, and we offered our effort. He was generous and cared for us every step of the way.

This is part of my story—my testimony to you.

Pastors and deacons, even if we do not always say it aloud, are storytellers.

Not because we invent stories, but because stories sustain us. We are heirs of a Master who taught almost entirely through stories—parables of a sower, a Samaritan, a searching shepherd, a waiting father.

Beyond what I have shared about my life, I want to tell you a story that is both ancient and deeply mine.

A story that crosses centuries, mountains, oceans, dictatorships, migrations, and borders.

A story that convinces me that the Church cannot remain silent in the face of what we are living in 2026.

My great-great-grandmother was born in Pont de Monvert, in the Cévennes of France.

Her family had always been Protestant—direct followers of Calvin’s Reformation—part of a community that embraced the Reformed faith when it was dangerous, minority, and persecuted.

Pont de Monvert is not just a place on a map.

It is where, in 1702, the Camisard resistance began—young Huguenots who refused to renounce their faith when the State decided that religious uniformity mattered more than human dignity.

They worshiped in caves, protected their preachers, and passed Bibles to one another as if they were bread for survival.

They lived their faith with stubbornness, hope, and resistance.

That story is not just a chapter in a book.

It is part of my blood.

It is the spiritual memory of my family: a memory of persecution, resistance, conscience, and fidelity to God above fear.

Two hundred forty years later, between 1940 and 1944, that same memory reappeared in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a Protestant village that believed faith is not proven by speeches but by open doors.

André and Magda Trocmé taught their congregation that obeying God meant protecting the persecuted—even if it was illegal, dangerous, or unpopular.

Le Chambon did not improvise. It remembered.

It remembered Pont de Monvert.

It remembered the clandestine gatherings.

It remembered that Christian conscience is not for sale.

And because of that memory, thousands of Jews found refuge,
bread, a bed, and dignity.

When the pastor, his wife, and the villagers were later asked why they had risked their lives, they answered with disarming simplicity: "Because it was the right thing to do. Because we knew it was what we had to do."

That sentence contains an entire theology: the theology of conscience, the theology of human dignity, the theology of obedience to Christ above fear.

My story also passes through Argentina, through the dark years when thousands disappeared, when the State turned against its own people, when many had to flee, hide, or go into exile.

There I learned another lesson: when the Church is silent, others die. When faith becomes comfortable, suffering multiplies. When the pastor does not tell the truth, the wolf rejoices.

Argentina taught me that neutrality is never neutral.

It always favors the oppressor.

And now we are here, in the United States, in 2026—a country literally built by immigrants. A country sustained by hands that rarely appear in the headlines: those who harvest our food, clean offices at dawn, work construction under the sun, care for children and the elderly, labor in kitchens, factories, and fields, pay taxes without receiving benefits, and dream of a better future for their children.

Men and women who do the jobs others refuse—hard, poorly paid, invisible jobs—and they do them with pride, dignity, and hope.

Yet many live in fear. Fear of a raid.

Fear of deportation.

Fear of losing everything.

This year we witnessed the deaths of Renée Nicole Good and Alex Jeffrey Pretti, two citizens who lost their lives in encounters with federal agents.

Their deaths have become symbols of a moral wound we cannot ignore.

This is not about politics. It is about human lives. It is about our neighbor.

And while this happens here, the world weeps.

We see Palestinian families trapped in violence, facing hunger, lack of medicine, collapsed hospitals, and relentless fear.

We see the immense suffering of Ukraine—lives, homes, and hopes destroyed; women, men, and children living under constant threat, exposed to abuse, bombings, and irreparable loss.

We see conflicts, wars, in the Middle East—Israel, Iran, Lebanon, and others—leaving thousands dead and entire communities devastated.

We see extremist groups fueled by hatred, dreaming of the destruction of the other, forgetting that violence never brings justice and hatred never builds peace.

When we look at all these moments together, we see a red thread—a theological thread:

- 1702: the State persecutes the Huguenots.
- 1942: the State persecutes the Jews.
- The 1970s: the State persecutes its own citizens.
- 2026: the State injures and kills in immigration procedures, and thousands of immigrants live under constant threat.
- Today: wars destroy entire peoples; hunger consumes lives; violence crushes hope.

And in every era, God asks the same question: Where is your brother?

The Christian answer does not change:

My brother is the persecuted one. My brother is the immigrant. My brother is the one who fears. My brother is the one who suffers.

My brother is the one who dies unjustly.

As Lutheran pastors, we do not speak from ideology but from: the theology of the cross, human dignity, justification by grace, Christian freedom, conscience illuminated by the Word, and the biblical mandate—repeated more than thirty times—to protect the foreigner.

Our tradition teaches: when the State wounds, the Church heals; when the State excludes, the Church welcomes; when the State fears, the Church trusts; when the State kills, the Church proclaims life.

We are called to be pastors and deacons who awaken conscience, who reflect Christ's call to do what is right, who accompany, protect, and love.

A pastor does not abandon the sheep when the wolves come.

So today, dear colleagues, I invite you to remember that we are storytellers.

But we do not tell stories to entertain.

We tell stories to awaken, to heal, to protect, to remember who we are.

Because when we tell the story of Pont de Monvert,

the story of Le Chambon,

the story of Argentina,

the story of Renée Good and Alex Pretti,

and the cries of peoples suffering war and violence, we are telling the story of the God who never abandons the vulnerable.

We are remembering our deepest vocation: to be pastors who care, who denounce, who accompany, who protect, who love.

Pastors and deacons who awaken conscience. Pastors and deacons who reflect Christ's call to do what is right. Pastors and deacons who tell stories that save.

Today I ask you to tell a story to your communities, your neighbors, your families, and your friends. Tell them that the families living in our country and our state are good people—decent, kind, tireless workers.

Tell them that they, like your ancestors, came seeking a better future for themselves and their children.

Tell them not to fear or reject them for speaking another language or having another skin color, because they, just like you, have the same dreams, the same love for their children, the same pain in farewells and absences, the same tears in loss and separation.

Tell them that these families are your neighbors, created just as you were.

Remind them that we are divinely commanded to love, receive, and protect them.

Tell them that together we must pray for them and their families—that they not be persecuted, rejected, or discriminated against.

Ask them to pray that God may enlighten the authorities, that families not be separated, that innocent children not be imprisoned, that medical care not be denied, and that they be allowed to continue working for the good of their families, of society, and of this great nation.

To conclude:

Pastor Mark Buchan and I now serve as co-pastors in our missions.

Pastor Mark and Dr. Al Roberts, our musician since the beginning of Cristo Rey, have earned the title “Latin Americans at Heart.”

I invite each of you to come to Cristo Rey on Sundays at 5 PM. You will be welcomed with love and joy. You will receive bulletins in English, as well as the readings and a copy of the sermon in English. Join us in giving thanks to God for brotherhood, love, and diversity. And one day, also, you will receive from us—or from God—the title of latin Americans at heart.

Thank you.