



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE THIRD GROUP OF BISHOPS FROM POLAND
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Clementine Hall
Saturday, 17 December 2005*

Dear Brothers in the Episcopal Ministry,

I welcome you all with joy, the third group of Bishops from Poland to come on a visit ad limina Apostolorum.

In my previous Addresses I touched on many topics connected with the commitment to evangelization in the modern world. I also announced that in the third part of my Message I would focus my reflection on the role of the lay faithful in the Church.

Let us therefore begin with the most fundamental setting in the structure of the Church: the parish. In the Conciliar Decree on the [Apostolate of Lay People](#) we read: "The parish offers an outstanding example of 'community' apostolate, for it gathers into a unity all the human diversities that are found there and inserts them into the universality of the Church. The laity should develop the habit of working in the parish in close union with their priests, of bringing before the Ecclesial Community their own problems, world problems and questions regarding man's salvation, to examine them together and solve them by general discussion. According to their abilities the laity ought to cooperate in all the apostolic and missionary enterprises of their ecclesial family" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 10).

The first and foremost requirement is for the parish to be an "ecclesial community" and an "ecclesial family". Even if the parishioners are very numerous, every effort must be made to ensure that they are not reduced to a mass of anonymous faithful.

The role of priests, and of parish priests in particular, is of course indispensable in fulfilling this

duty. They are the first who must know the sheep of their own flock, maintain their pastoral contacts with every milieu and endeavour to know the spiritual and material needs of the parishioners.

The active participation of lay people in the formation of the community is also important. Here, I have in mind first of all the Pastoral Council and the Finance Council (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. [537](#)). Although these are only consultative and not decision-making, nevertheless they can effectively help Pastors in discerning the needs of the community and identifying the ways to meet them. A spirit of common concern for the good of the faithful must always govern these Councils' collaboration with the Pastors.

Pastors also need to have a lively contact with the various apostolic communities that work in the parish environment. Nor can they forget the need for collaboration among the communities themselves. There should never be rivalry between them but rather, a reciprocal and cordial complementarity in dealing with apostolic tasks. In particular, the leaders of these groups should not forget that, working on parish territory and in a parish community, they are called to carry out a joint pastoral programme under the direction of the Pastors in authority.

As regards evangelization, I have already spoken of the need for adult catechesis. Although this is based on Sacred Scripture and the Church's Magisterium, it must additionally focus in on sacramental experience and in particular on the commitment to living the mystery of the Eucharist.

The Council Fathers did not hesitate to recognize that the Eucharist is the "source and summit of all evangelization" (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 5; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10). As my beloved Predecessor John Paul II wrote: "The Church has received the Eucharist from Christ her Lord not as one gift - however precious - among so many others, but as the *gift par excellence*, for it is the gift of himself, of his person in his sacred humanity, as well as the gift of his saving work" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 11).

The Church's Pastors must therefore spare no effort to ensure that the persons entrusted to them are aware of the greatness of this gift and receive this Sacrament of love as often as possible, both in the Eucharistic Celebration and in Communion as well as in Adoration.

In his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, John Paul II recalled that the Sunday Eucharist is "the privileged place where communion is ceaselessly proclaimed and nurtured" (n. 36). I know that in the Church in Poland many of the faithful take part in Sunday Mass. However, Pastors should do all they can, encouraged by their Bishops, to ensure that the number of participants at the Sunday liturgy does not diminish but grows.

I cordially ask you, Brothers, to encourage priests to care for the children and young people who come to the altar of the Lord as altar servers and lectors. You should also extend your pastoral

care to the young girls who participate actively, with their own role, in the Liturgy. This pastoral service can bear abundant fruit for priestly and religious vocations.

In the past century, especially after the Council, various movements developed in the Church with the purpose of evangelization. These movements cannot exist "beside", as it were, the universal community of the Church. Therefore, it is one of the diocesan Bishop's tasks to keep in touch actively with them, encouraging them to work in conformity with the charism recognized by the Church, and at the same time to be on guard against being closed to the situation that surrounds them.

Many of these movements have established a lively contact with non-Catholic Churches. They can make an important contribution to the work of building ecumenical ties: prayer in common and activities undertaken together foster the hope that it will also be possible to hasten a rapprochement in the areas of doctrine and Church life.

However, here too, Bishops should take care to interpret ecumenism correctly. It must always consist in the search for the truth and not for easy compromises that could cause Catholic movements to lose their own identity.

Besides the ecclesial movements, there are many groups of lay people who meet on a given ground or even on the basis of their profession and turn to the Bishops, asking for a specific pastoral care to be introduced that corresponds to their reality. Dear Brothers, I encourage you to support these initiatives and to give to each one the possibility to develop his or her own spirituality on the basis of daily challenges.

Among these contexts, John Paul II paid special attention to "leaders in public life" (*Rise, Let Us Be on Our Way*, Paulines Publications, Africa, 2004, p. 115), who at the same time desire to live a life of faith and bear a Christian witness. The Council urged them: "Those with a talent for the difficult yet noble art of politics, or whose talents in this matter can be developed, should prepare themselves for it, and forgetting their own convenience and material interests, they should engage in political activity. They must combat injustice and oppression, arbitrary domination and intolerance by individuals or political parties, and they must do so with integrity and wisdom" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 75).

In carrying out this task, Christian politicians cannot be left without the Church's help. Here, in particular, it is a question of helping them to become aware of their Christian identity and universal moral values that are founded in human nature, so that they are permeated by them on the basis of a clear conscience, in order to transpose them to civil organizations with a view to building a coexistence that respects all dimensions of the human being.

It must never be forgotten, however, that it is a matter "of supreme importance, especially in a

pluralistic society, to work out a proper vision of the relationship between the political community and the Church, and to distinguish clearly between the activities of Christians, acting individually or collectively in their own name as citizens guided by the dictates of a Christian conscience, and their activity acting along with their Pastors in the name of the Church" (*ibid.*, n. 76).

To conclude, I would like to point out another dimension of the commitment of lay people in the Church. In today's world, together with globalization and the rapid pace of communications, we are seeing in many areas a greater sensitivity to the needs of others and the willingness to go to the rescue wherever a disaster occurs.

Next to international and national initiatives, various forms of volunteer service are developing whose goal is to provide help for the needy in their own milieu. People willing to spend their own time are serving others and working in homes, shelters for the homeless, dependent persons, single mothers and victims of violence. They also offer assistance to the sick, people on their own, numerous poor families and persons with physical or mental disabilities. Emergency centres are organized to handle crises, efficient units at the service of people who are experiencing some difficulty or other that life may hold in store. It is impossible not to appreciate the work of those who are inspired by the Gospel's Good Samaritan; it should be sustained and guided.

I know that in Poland a volunteer service is being developed with the goal of defending human life. Gratitude is due to all who undertake the work of education, of the preparation for marriage and family life and for those who defend the right to life of every human being, from conception until natural death.

Many contribute their own material resources to these activities, others give their time and still others offer the gift of prayer. They all expect encouragement and moral support from the Bishops, priests and from the entire community of believers. May this not be lacking!

Missions are another context of Church life in which volunteers are involved. More and more lay people depart for mission countries to work there in accordance with their professional training and talents, and at the same time, to give a witness of Christian love to the inhabitants of the poorest regions of the world.

This activity deserves admiration and recognition. I urge you, dear Brothers, to accept with openness and kindness, if also always with due prudence, those lay people who are prepared to work in the missions. The great missionary work of the whole Church should receive spiritual and material support from everyone, in accordance with the Christian vocation of each one, in the awareness of the commitment which stems from Baptism to take to all peoples the Gospel message of Christ's love.

Dear Brothers, you will find a whole range of other worthwhile thoughts on the activity of lay

people in the Church and in the world in the Documents of the Council and of my Predecessors in this Apostolic See. It is worth returning to reflect on this Magisterium.

Beloved Brothers, you know well how to discern the needs of the communities entrusted to your pastoral care and how to create the best conditions for a good collaboration of the laity with the clergy in the same work of evangelization, sanctification and the building of the Kingdom of God. May Mary, Mother of the Church, support you in this task! May the Good Lord bless you!

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