



The Holy See

LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To my dear Brothers,

*the Bishops of the United States of America*¹. As you are gathering in Washington for your annual Meeting, I wish to be spiritually present with you in order to support you in your pastoral ministry. I wish to assure you of my fraternal solidarity with you as you work and toil, day in and day out, to bring the Gospel to your people. At the same time I wish to encourage you, in the midst of the challenges and difficulties, to place all your trust in our Lord Jesus Christ, "the chief Shepherd", who is always with his Church. My desire in addressing you is motivated by my own ministry as Successor of Peter and therefore as the first servant of the Church's unity and universality. I would like at this time to reflect with you, the Pastors of the particular Churches in the United States, on some aspects of this Petrine ministry. Although it is indeed burdensome, it is made lighter by God's grace and by your fraternal collaboration and your prayers, and for all of this I am deeply grateful. The very mystery of the Church impels us to recognize that the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church is present in each particular Church throughout the world. And since the Successor of Peter has been constituted for the whole Church as Pastor and as Vicar of Christ, all the particular Churches - precisely because they are Catholic, precisely because they embody in themselves the mystery of the universal Church - are called to live in communion with him. Our own relationship of ecclesial communion - *collegialitas efectiva et affectiva* - is discovered in the same mystery of the Church. It is precisely because you are Pastors of particular Churches in which there subsists the fullness of the universal Church that you are, and must always be, in full communion with the Successor of Peter. To recognize your ministry as "vicars and delegates of Christ" for your particular Churches is to understand all the more clearly the ministry of the Chair of Peter, which "presides over the whole assembly of charity, protects legitimate variety, and at the same time sees to it that differences do not hinder unity but rather contribute to it". To promote the universality of the Church, to protect her legitimate variety, to guarantee her Catholic unity, to confirm the Bishops in their apostolic faith and ministry, to preside in love - all this is what the Successor of Peter is called by Christ to do. This Petrine service by the will of Christ is directed to the good of the universal Church and all the ecclesial communities that compose her. For this reason I endeavour to be of service to all the Bishops of the Church, so that together as one College, each of us having a different role, we can all serve the Church of Christ in the distinctive ministry assigned to us as Bishops. It is an awareness of my own role in the Church, and especially in regard to her unity and universality, that has prompted me to do everything possible to confirm my brother Bishops throughout the world in their own collegial ministry. In several specific ways I have tried to be of service to you, my brother Bishops in the United States, placing my full trust in you and

counting on your collaboration.² Because of the great importance of seminary training, and with the intention of assisting you in one of your greatest responsibilities for the Church, I called for an Apostolic Visitation to the Seminaries in your country. This project was entrusted to Bishop John Marshall of Burlington. He in turn shared the responsibility with many competent collaborators, who visited seminaries throughout the country, consulting at length with the Rector, the staff and the students of each institution. The aim of the entire project was to do everything possible to ensure the ever more faithful application of the Second Vatican Council to seminary training. The Visitation met with splendid cooperation and interest, beginning with the Bishops of the seminaries visited. Bishop Marshall has conferred with the Holy See on a number of occasions and I wish to thank him again for all his dedicated work. My thanks go also to the different teams that worked so generously with him, and to the seminaries themselves. Already the first phase of the Visitation has been completed. The Congregation for Catholic Education has made its suggestions and comments, and has expressed great satisfaction for all the good that has been accomplished in the process. Cardinal Baum has informed you and myself of all the positive results and of the recommendations made. There are still other phases to be completed, and further implementation to be made, but the manner in which the Visitation was conducted renders honour to the Church in the United States and gives great hope for the future. I am convinced that many people were open to the grace of the Holy Spirit and that our collegial enterprise has been blessed by the Lord.³ Another way in which I endeavored to be of service to the Church in the United States was through the Pontifical Commission for Religious Life that I established in 1983, naming Archbishop John Quinn as Pontifical Delegate and Archbishop Thomas Kelly and Bishop Raymond Lessard as members. The task of these Bishops, as I explained in my Letter entitled "In this Extraordinary Holy Year" was "to facilitate the pastoral work of their brother Bishops in the United States in helping the religious of your country whose Institutes are engaged in apostolic works to live their ecclesial vocation to the full". I asked "the Commission to consult with a number of religious, to profit from the insights that come from the experience of religious life lived in union with the Church". I likewise asked the Commission to be concerned for the decline of religious vocations and "in collaboration with religious, utilizing the prayerful insights of individual religious and major superiors, to analyze the reason for this decline in vocations". All of this was requested "with a view to encouraging a new growth and fresh move forward in this most important sector of the Church's life". Although it was my decision to undertake this work, it had also been suggested to me by American Bishops who had foreseen its usefulness. This Commission worked very hard to help you "to render special pastoral service to the religious of your dioceses and your country", as I had requested. As it worked closely with you, the Commission reported to me on various occasions. I am very grateful to Archbishop Kelly and Bishop Lessard for their protracted and devoted collaboration. I am likewise deeply thankful to all of you, the Bishops of the United States, for your own response. It was indeed a wonderful response of personal generosity and collegial collaboration toward the pastoral goal of encouraging "the religious, their Institutes and associations to live fully the mystery of the Redemption, in union with the whole Church and according to the specific charism of their religious life". My deep appreciation goes also to the religious themselves who have so generously worked with you in response to the Church's call. After over three years of constant work by the Pontifical Commission, I have now received its final report. I have likewise received the many letters that you the Bishops wrote me as "testes fidei", concerning religious life in your dioceses. This report and these letters will continue to be studied, and I shall be subsequently in a position to give you a response. Although the work of the Pontifical Commission has been completed, the pastoral ministry and responsibility of the Bishops for religious life remain, and I would ask all of you to continue to exercise this mission of yours in accordance with the above-mentioned Letter of mine and the Document attached to that Letter, "Essential Elements" which is a summary of the Church's teaching on religious life. In thanking you for your solidarity and collaboration in this question of immense importance for the Church in the United States and for the universal Church, I also thank our Lord Jesus Christ

who has permitted us, working together in the pastoral ministry, to be of service to his Church.⁴ With great joy I am now looking forward to my Pastoral Visit to the United States, which is to take place September 10 to 18, 1987, and which will include Miami, Columbia in South Carolina, New Orleans, San Antonio, Phoenix, Los Angeles, Monterey and San Francisco. I regret that I am not able to accept at this time the many other invitations that I received. I shall however be deeply united spiritually with all your particular Churches at the time of my coming. The aim of my Pastoral Visit is to celebrate with you our unity in Jesus Christ and in his Church, to proclaim Jesus Christ and his Gospel, and to confirm you all in faith and love. I look forward to being with all the priests, deacons, religious, seminarians and laity; and I shall rejoice in seeing once again firsthand "your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ". I look forward to visiting your fellow Christians, your fellow believers and all Americans of good will. Meanwhile, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, let us continue to reflect on the great mystery of the universal Church and all the particular Churches that share her life and unity. It will be for all of us a source of joy and strength, of courage and confidence. Let us thank the Lord Jesus who has called us to shepherd his people in his name, and with him "to gather into one all the scattered children of God". Once again I commend you and all your people to the Immaculate Virgin Mother of God, Patroness of the United States, and in the love of Christ Jesus I send you my Apostolic Blessing. *From the Vatican, November 4, 1986* **IOANNES PAULUS PP.II** © Copyright 1986 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana