



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF ENGLAND AND WALES
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Monday, 23 November 1987

Dear Brothers,

1. I greet you today with affection in our Lord Jesus Christ. Through you I also wish to greet the clergy, religious and laity of the local Churches which constitute the *Province of Birmingham in England and the Province of Cardiff in the Principality of Wales*. It is my special joy to welcome you here on the occasion of the beatification of eighty-five martyrs from England, Wales and Scotland. Their witness to the Catholic Faith is part of *a long history of fidelity to the See of Peter*, which is confirmed by your own visit *ad limina Apostolorum*.

These martyrs bear witness to *the profound mystery of ecclesial communion that unites us*. In honouring them, we reaffirm and celebrate that communion of life, charity and truth established by Christ himself and used by him as an instrument of redemption for all (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 9). The majority were priests and their lay collaborators. They were martyred for seeking to bring the word of God and the sacraments to their Catholic fellow-countrymen who shared their conviction that the bonds of full ecclesial communion were important enough to risk punishment and even death in that troubled time. We rejoice today with the other Christian brothers and sisters in your land that after so many centuries we are now able to seek full communion together with mutual respect and esteem.

In death these martyrs bear heroic witness to that *all consuming love* which has its origin in Christ and which is always at work in his Body for the salvation of the world. As Saint Paul teaches, "*caritas Christi urget nos*" (2Cor. 5, 14), the love of Christ impels us. Believers must be solicitous not only for their own salvation, but for the salvation of all their brothers and sisters and of all humanity. This outgoing love is ordered to the communion of which I have spoken: communion

with God and communion with one another, a “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (*Eph.* 4, 3).

2. Today, in particular, this love impels us to have a *special concern for those Catholics who have fallen away* from the practice of the Faith for which the martyrs gave their lives. Throughout the world we find people who do not take an active part in the ecclesial communion to which they have been called by their Baptism, or who no longer live according to the Church’s teachings. In countries such as your own, practising the faith no longer involves risking one’s life. Rather, it is a matter of persevering in faith amidst *all the pressures of modern living*, which tempt people to abandon their faith. Some would seek to justify themselves by claiming that one can be a good Christian apart from the Church. With Scripture and Tradition, however, we must insist on the unbreakable bond that exists between Christ and his Church, between the bridegroom and his bride, between the head and the members, between the Mother and her spiritual children.

In order to understand the situation of some of our brothers and sisters, we must turn to *the parable of the sower in the Gospel*, as it is explained to the disciples by Our Lord himself when they ask him the significance of the seed falling on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, or on good ground (*Cfr. Matth.* 13). Christ tells them that the seed is the word of God which, for want of understanding, can be snatched away by the devil; or one can fall away when tribulation or persecution arises on account of that word; or yet again, the cares of the world and the delight in riches can choke the word, and it proves unfruitful (*Ibid.* 13, 18-23). This teaching provides a timeless insight into our weak and sinful condition, and should serve as a reminder of the need for vigilance, perseverance, and constant conversion of heart on the part of us all.

3. In our own day *we must “read” the society of which we are a part in the light of this parable*. It is in many aspects a dechristianized society, which can never hope to endure in any truly fruitful or moral way apart from the biblical foundation upon which it was built. Yet atheistic or agnostic secularism and an impoverished humanism surround believers with unbelief. The saving truths of revelation embodied in doctrine and sacramental communion are often replaced by individual religious sentiment or a vague and illusory search for the divine or the sacred. This is the situation of many today who have fallen away from the practice of their faith. The seed of God’s word, to use the imagery of the parable, continues to fall along the path, on rocky ground and among thorns, as well as on good ground.

For others, the abandonment of active participation in the Church is the result of an alienating or hurtful experience, whether deliberate or unintentional, on the part of some member of the Church community or one of its ministers. For still others, a lack of understanding or acceptance of developments in the Church since the Second Vatican Council is a cause for alienation or even hostility. Nor can we fail to mention the many who simply drift away through inertia or indifference.

4. Dear brothers and spiritual heirs of the martyrs who gave their lives so that others might practise their Catholic faith: in imitation of Christ the Good Shepherd, *we who are shepherds must*

go in search of these sheep. I know that you share this concern of mine, which I have expressed in the form of an appeal to fallen away Catholics during my pastoral visits. I encourage you to continue the efforts which you and many of your brother bishops have made in this regard. For those of us whom the Lord has appointed pastors, this obligation is especially important. The rite of episcopal ordination makes this clear, when the Bishop-elect is questioned about his resolve as a good shepherd to seek out the sheep who stray and to gather them into the fold of the Lord. Although our expectations may sometimes be disappointed, we should rejoice in the Lord's assurance that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (*Luc. 15, 7*). *What greater joy can be ours* as pastors than to see brothers and sisters return to the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, and once again "devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (*Act. 2, 42*).

5. At the same time, we recall that *the work of evangelization*, which extends to non-practising Catholics, *is a fundamental duty of the whole People of God* (Cfr. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 35). It is the whole Church that evangelizes; every effort at evangelization is ecclesial in nature (Cfr. Pauli VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 60). And so, dear brothers, we are not alone. Our concern for the non-practising is shared by our clergy, who witness firsthand their absence and the diminishing effect of this absence on the local community. It likewise affects the faithful, many of whom suffer deeply because their spouse, relations, friends, and their children in particular, have fallen away.

So many of our brothers and sisters ask me to pray that their loved ones will return to the Church, and rightly so, for *prayer is the most hearts with the grace of God*. I urge you to join me in encouraging the sick and suffering, whose prayer is so powerful with the Lord, to pray for this intention. To our prayers we must add an active zeal filled with charity and a spirit of reconciliation, so that a path home may be cleared for the stray sheep. If our ecclesial communion is not a loving and inviting one, then we fail in our mission to be the visible sacrament of unity and of peace in the world (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 9). We may be confident, however, that despite our weaknesses God will not fail to bless our efforts as we search for straying hearts and minds and lead them back to full and active communion with Christ and his Church.

I would also like to make special mention of four *priests*, who are our necessary helpers and counsellors in the ministry, our brothers and friends (Cfr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 7). They may sometimes feel a sense of helplessness, especially if they work alone in isolated parishes. It is important that they also should experience the *fraternal support of their bishop and the entire presbyterate* for their ministry. However humble or apparently isolated that ministry may be, it is truly an ecclesial one, "attached to the evangelizing activity of the whole Church by institutional relationships, but also by profound invisible links in the order of grace" (Pauli VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 60). May they take heart from the example of the martyrs whom we are honouring, whose zeal and self-sacrifice still speak to us over the centuries.

Dear Brothers, may these martyrs and all the saints of England and Wales intercede for you and for your clergy, religious and laity. May Mary, Mother of the Church, be a guiding star for you on your pilgrimage of faith. May Christ the Good Shepherd strengthen you in your love for one another and for all his sheep, *especially those who are far from their spiritual home*. As a pledge of his joy and peace I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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