



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF INDIA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Thursday, 6 April 1989

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. On 1st February 1986 I had the privilege of meeting all the *Bishops of India* gathered at New Delhi and of speaking to you about our common ministry as servants of the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. My visit to "the shrine of the People of God" in your country allowed us visibly and concretely to manifest those bonds that unite us in the Church, in what I called "an hour of ecclesial communion". In all our contacts I have endeavoured to exercise the ministry of Peter, to confirm you in the faith and in your arduous apostolic ministry. From you I receive the testimony of the Church's pilgrimage of fidelity and service as she daily toils to manifest God's love in the context of your country and its needs.

Now the Bishops of India are coming to Rome on their *ad Limina* visits. In this first group I greet you, *the Latin Rite pastors of the Provinces of Agra, Bhopal and Delhi*. In you I embrace the priests, religious and laity of each one of your Dioceses and I invoke God's peace upon each particular Church. In our private conversations you have told me of the hopes and sufferings of your communities, of the "fruits of the Gospel" which you see flourishing in your regions, of the limitations placed on your ministry and the difficulties which you encounter, of the ways in which you and your fellow-workers are striving to carry out the pastoral and apostolic task entrusted to you.

2. The fundamental theme of every *ad Limina* visit is the Church, the great sacrament, that is, the sign and means of our union with God and of the unity and peace of all mankind (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). In speaking to Bishops from India I wish to touch on various aspects of this wonderful reality which fills our lives and inspires our every effort. Today I shall refer briefly to some basic concepts which must underlie our *understanding of the Church and of our own role as Bishops*.

Later, in meetings with other groups of Bishops from India, I intend to refer to certain specific aspects of the Church's mission.

3. Jesus Christ inaugurated the Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of God's Kingdom, which for centuries had been promised in the Scriptures: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand" (*Marc.* 1, 15; cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 5). The Paschal Mystery of his Passion, Death and Resurrection, which we have recently celebrated and which is constantly re-enacted in the Eucharist, is the source of the Church's power to proclaim and establish the kingdom among all peoples. The Council in fact teaches that the Church "becomes on earth the initial budding forth of the kingdom, and while she slowly grows, the Church strains toward the consummation of the kingdom and with all her strength hopes and desires to be united in glory with her King" (*Lumen Gentium*, 5).

The kingdom is inseparable from the Church, because both are inseparable from the person and work of Jesus himself. He established the Church to be the revelation and instrument of the kingdom. It is therefore not possible to separate the Church from the kingdom as if the first belonged exclusively to the imperfect realm of history, while the second would be the perfect eschatological fulfilment of the divine plan of salvation. Nor can the kingdom be considered a purely interior or spiritual reality, in contrast with the Church considered as an historical and social realization of Jesus' intention to establish a community of faith and salvation. Consequently it is not possible to relativize the Church's role in bringing all to union with Christ.

The kingdom in fact is to be sought *here and now, in the mystery of the Church* which "grows visibly in the world through the power of God", until she achieves her glorious fulfilment when all the just "will be gathered together with the Father in the universal Church" (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 2. 3).

4. *The Church is a mystery in the biblical sense of the term*: a transcendent salvific reality made manifest in a visible way. In the Council's teaching, the Church is a divine-human reality, analogous to the mystery of the Incarnate Word (Cfr. *Ibid*, 8). The Mystical Body of Christ and the visible structure of God's faithful people form one interwoven reality, *complexam realitatem* (Cfr. *Ibid*), the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church of which we are ministers and apostles.

In each particular Church the mystery of God's eternal love communicated through the Son in the Holy Spirit is made present in the assembly of the faithful through the grace conferred by the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and through the charity which animates the community's life and work. In India, the Church manifests God's love especially through her many religious and social activities and through the joyful witness of her members in their daily lives. An important part of your task as pastors is to remind the ecclesial community that, if ministry and service are to bring forth fruits in the power of the Spirit, *all are called to bear witness to humility and self-sacrifice, to give special attention to the weak and the poor, and to pursue the path of penance*

and renewal (Cfr. Ibid).

5. The Church in every place, but especially so in India, can bear effective witness only if she is present as the humble servant of all those in need. In this she follows the example and teaching of her divine Master, who “came not to be served but to serve” (*Matth.* 20, 28). Her whole way of life must be *marked by the same love which moved Jesus to compassion for the people* (Cfr. *ibid.* 9, 36), *by the love which led him to give his life for our redemption* (Cfr. *Io.* 10, 15). In proclaiming the word of truth and love, the Church seeks the complete well-being and development of all individuals. But her evangelizing mission must never be a search for mere material advantage. As she responds to Christ’s command to go to all peoples, she does so with respect and love, but also with a full awareness of the unique value and importance of the message she brings.

With eyes fixed on the forth-coming significant event of the beginning of a new Christian millennium, the Church is called to *a renewed effort to proclaim the Good News of salvation to the men and women of our time*. The Church in India can look to the example of a host of ardent heralds of the Gospel who have sown the seeds of what are today your local Churches “endowed with their own vitality and maturity” (*Ad Gentes*, 6). Among the most famous of these preachers of the Good News are Saint Thomas the Apostle, Saint Francis Xavier and Saint John de Britto, and to their intercession I commend you and your ministry.

I am aware that your own part of India is marked at present by an instability deeply rooted in ethnic, religious and social differences. The nation as a whole is struggling to overcome situations of grave poverty, unemployment, and often a lack of safeguards for the rights of women and children. The Catholic community is a small minority scattered over a large area and often subject to serious difficulties of different kinds. These circumstances are a challenge calling for dedicated effort and fresh thinking in relation to evangelization and ministry.

6. The laity, in harmony with their specific role in the Church, as described in the recent Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, “*Christifideles Laici*”, must be urged and helped to play their part in the task of evangelization and service in the spirit of the Gospel. “A new state of affairs today both in the Church and in social, economic, political and cultural life, calls with a particular urgency for the action of the lay faithful” (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Christifideles Laici*, 3). *Young people* too should be encouraged to give of their talents and time, perhaps in a programme of voluntary service for specific periods as “apostles” to their peers and to their “world”. I also wish to encourage you in all that you are doing to promote prayer groups, the Bible apostolate and the diffusion of Christian doctrine through the press and the modern means of communication.

7. A particularly urgent aspect of the Church’s service is the presence of lay people “as signs of courage and intellectual creativity in the privileged places of culture, that is, the world of education – school and university – in places of scientific and technological research, the areas of artistic creativity and work in the humanities” (*Ibid.* 44). *The Church in India is already widely present in*

society through her educational activities, and indeed she is esteemed by non-Christians for her contribution in this field, since they themselves often benefit from her institutions. The ecclesial community cannot but make every effort to ensure that Catholic education transmits and promotes truths and values in harmony with the message of salvation, and prepares people to avoid falling victim to selfishness. I am aware that the *education of the poor has always been a priority and a part of the success of Catholic schools in India*, and that fresh efforts in this regard are constantly being made. This option for the poor requires special generosity and enterprise, but it is indeed a necessary application of the Church's teaching on social justice.

While the pastors of the Church have a special role to play in ensuring that the objectives and policies of Catholic institutions are in line with the Church's teachings and with the spirit of service proclaimed in the Gospel, it is the responsible *dedication of so many religious and lay men and women* which effectively sustains the Church's testimony and service to society in this apostolate. To all of them I send cordial greetings and an invitation always to see their efforts as a valid and necessary contribution to the coming and revelation of Christ's kingdom. By letting their light shine pure and undefiled before their contemporaries, they are bearing witness to Christ, the true light of the nations.

Dear Brother Bishops: in the love of the Risen Lord I renew the expression of gratitude which I addressed to all the Bishops of India on the occasion of my visit, *my gratitude for your proclamation of God's saving love*. Upon you and your fellow-workers, particularly the priests, I invoke God's abundant gifts of faith, hope and love, of strength and perseverance in the ministry which has been entrusted to you for the uplifting and salvation of our brothers and sisters.

May Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, whose faithful presence in the midst of the Apostles did so much to sustain the first Christian community (Cfr. *Act. 2, 14*), intercede for the needs of the Church in *the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Agra, Bhopal and Delhi*.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all (Cfr. *Apoc. 22, 2*).

© Copyright 1989 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana