



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF BELARUS ON THEIR  
"AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" VISIT**

*Monday, 7 April 1997*

*Your Eminence,  
Dear Bishop of Grodno,*

1. "Peace be with you" (cf. Mt 28:9). In meeting you I joyfully make my own the risen Christ's greeting. Through you, I extend it to the Ecclesial Communities of your beloved country. They are experiencing a providential springtime after the winter of violent persecution that lasted long decades and was expressed in the systematic enforcement of atheism on the people, especially the young, in the almost total destruction of ecclesial structures, as well as in the enforced closure of places of Christian formation.

With regard to the present spiritual rebirth, how can we not first thank the Lord who has opened the doors of freedom of worship to you, even if still limited, and who has moved hearts to allow young priestly and religious forces to enter your country, together with the construction or restoration of many churches and chapels? This was also achieved with the help and solidarity of many brothers and sisters all over the world, whom I remember with gratitude. Thus we give heartfelt thanks to God, the Father of goodness, who at last heard the cry of his oppressed people, and to the many men and women of goodwill who have made themselves instruments of his care, for the gradual reconstruction of the community and ecclesial fabric of Belarus, despite the gravest difficulties.

2. This work of "physically" and spiritually rebuilding your country has, after three years, been followed by State recognition of the juridical status of the Archdiocese of Minsk-Mohilev and the Diocese of Pinsk, while relations with the Apostolic See have gradually become visible with the

appointment and presence “in loco” of a papal representative, a sign of my particular concern and love for your local Church and for all Belarus.

I am confident that you will continue on the way undertaken, in conformity with what has been established and promised in the bilateral agreements, in the legal recognition and in the administrative regulations for those who are not Belarusian citizens but are currently working generously in the country, and for the institutes of men and women religious who want to open houses in your territory.

The Catholic Church would like to be a sign of hope in Belarus for those who are expending their energies for a better future of peace and reconciliation for all. The effort to give the Diocese of Grodno a pastoral structure and the commitment of the Archdiocesan Synod of Minsk-Mohilev and Pinsk, deserve encouragement and support.

3. Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, in seeing your zeal and that of your priests, religious and lay people, we can certainly look to the future with well-founded trust. May you be sustained by your awareness of the love of God who guides man’s future and holds the destiny of history in his hands. May you be guided by the Blessed Virgin Mary, venerated and loved by your people especially at the shrine of Budslav.

With my heart comforted by these convictions, I would now like to consider with you several serious social and religious questions which, in the quinquennial reports for your visit *ad limina Apostolorum* you have wished to submit to the Bishop of Rome.

You are concerned by your country’s cultural, social, economic and political situation, which seems difficult and unstable; you are also anxious about the gradual impoverishment of broad levels of society, which cause some to feel a dangerous nostalgia for the past.

You are studying these problems in order to find appropriate solutions. However, you pay special attention to the religious “emergencies”, clearly emphasized in the discussions of these days. First of all, you have at heart the care and formation of priests; it is they who guide the laity and the Christian communities in their spiritual reawakening. I am grateful to them, because theirs is a particularly difficult ministry and I am well aware of it.

After so many years of neglect, the environment in which they work is frequently hostile, the field to be tilled is a tangle of thorns and brambles. The majority of the faithful are scattered over vast areas and are still apprehensive. The loneliness of priests is sometimes a heavy burden, since they often live far from one another due to pastoral needs. Furthermore, they have scarcely anything in common with regard to their origins, formation, life experience and mentality.

Well aware of your difficulties, beloved priests, I address you with affection, I embrace you and I

repeat to you the encouragement I addressed to the whole Church at the beginning of my Roman pontificate: “Do not be afraid!”, “Open the doors to Christ” (*Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. I, p. 38). The Lord Jesus has overcome the world (cf. Jn 16:33) and with him you are already victorious.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I do not have to advise you to love your priests, to support them with prayer and closeness, with words and also with material help, because you are already doing this with generous devotion. I only have to urge you to persevere. Continue the good tradition of monthly gatherings with the clergy. The Bishop’s meeting with his priests is always a providential opportunity for brotherhood and spiritual growth. Continue to guide priests in their personal asceticism and continuing formation, drawing inspiration for the necessary “up-dating” from the Second Vatican Council. Let no hardship discourage you or dampen your apostolic enthusiasm.

4. With regard to formation, in addition to the continuing formation intended for priests, I am thinking of the preparation of candidates for the priesthood. Is this not the most pressing problem? To identify their call, to foster their vocation and to guide the path of their formation is the task on which the Church’s future in your country depends. It is necessary to train priests who will gradually replace those who have come from other regions and are doing all they can among you in these years with great generosity. A similar effort must be made for the Interdiocesan Seminary of Grodno, now restored, which in time will be directed by superiors and teachers from your country. Of course, for the time being the formation of priests called to be “*homines Dei et hominum*” is not easy when the consequences of the “*homo sovieticus*”, formed during decades of an atheistic regime, is still being felt. Do not let yourselves be discouraged in this regard. Rely rather on Christ’s healing grace, on the generosity which grows out of a vocation of total self-giving love and on the spiritual and multi-disciplinary work of teachers.

“The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few” (Mt 9:37), Jesus reminds us in the Gospel. While you are waiting for the results of your current formation work, look around you and ask other local Churches for priests and men and women religious from various backgrounds, while taking into account the government’s attitude in this regard.

In the context of religious life, may the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, which expresses the Church’s esteem in a very precise way for the consecrated life, for what it is in itself and for the ecclesial sense that must be possessed by those who follow Christ more closely, light your way and console you in times of hardship.

5. Another aspect of pastoral work which I would like to highlight is the apostolate among the intelligentsia, among those, that is, who work in the various fields of culture. It is an endeavour that must not be neglected, although I am well aware that the priority you have set is the care of young people and families. In fact, everything seems to be a priority if one considers society’s ethical collapse and the “Soviet” mentality that still persists among ordinary people.

A new courageous plan of evangelization is needed, suited to the changed historical and social situations of the present time. Dedicate yourselves to this evangelization without interruption and take especially into account the great, historic appointment of the Jubilee of the Year 2000.

The new evangelization cannot do without courageous action for human advancement, on condition that it is directed to the service of every person and of the whole person. In this regard, the activities undertaken by Caritas can make a significant contribution. While I rejoice with you that it has been established at least as a central structure in all three Belarusian Dioceses, I hope that it will develop into organizations and activities, relying above all on the help of honest and zealous lay people who are competent and sensitive to the needs of children, the sick, the poor, the elderly and those who are seeking suitable training for life.

6. I cannot conclude this meeting without recalling that in Belarus dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters cannot fail to be helped by the fact that Catholics can say with them: "We are from here too!". Obviously, the Church's presence and apostolate is neither "proselytism" nor "missionary" in the negative sense that is sometimes given to this term among the Orthodox. Priests are present as the pastors of the flock, to respond to the need for spiritual assistance to which every believer has a right.

For your part, then, seek especially to initiate the dialogue of charity with those of other religions or who have none. In the first place, take pains to have fraternal relations with those to whom we are linked, although in a communion which is not yet perfect, by Gospel values, the Beatitudes, the "Our Father", Marian piety, the same sacraments, the same apostolic succession and love of the Church which finds its icon in the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity.

Co-operation with them and their pastors in human, cultural, charitable and religious projects is legitimate, insofar as it is not prevented for reasons of fidelity to the "depositum fidei", but always in conjunction with prudence and courage. Since no constituted hierarchy for the faithful of the Greek Catholic rite exists in Belarusian territory, I would like to take this opportunity to greet and bless them too, and to assure them that their joys and sadness, their hopes and distress, together with those of the beloved faithful of the Latin rite, are also mine, as are those of all humanity (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 1).

I impart my affectionate Blessing to you and to the peoples entrusted to your pastoral care.

