



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE Bishops' Conference of France ON ITS
"Ad limina Apostolorum" VISIT**

Saturday, 22 March 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to welcome you during your *ad limina* visit. It is an opportunity for you to strengthen the mission you have received, through your prayers at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul and your meetings in the different departments of the Roman Curia. Your presence in Rome expresses the fraternal communion which exists between the Successor of Peter and the diocesan Bishops around Christ, who is the Head of the Church. "We are in various places in the Church; we are not separated from his Body, 'because God is one, and one also is the mediator between God and men' (1 Tm 2:5)" St Paulinus of Nola, *Letter*, 2, 3). Our conversations enable me to be close to all who, with you, are involved in the mission and who contribute to the dynamism of the diocesan community.

The President of your *Eastern Apostolic Region*, Bishop Marcel Herriot, has given an overview of your pastoral concerns; I am grateful to him for it. This part of France presents many contrasts and sometimes acutely experiences the social difficulties present throughout the country. This must not unsettle the faithful but, on the contrary, lead them to show generous solidarity for the destitute, whatever their origin. On the other hand, the position of your region at one of the great crossroads of Europe leads you to exchanges with your neighbours that cannot fail to benefit all; your experience will be invaluable for the preparation of the new Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops, because the Church on this continent will profit from greater mutual knowledge and fraternal collaboration. I also point out that in many of your Dioceses the presence of large ecclesial communities which arose from the Reformation is an invitation to take an active part in ecumenical dialogue, one of the great tasks to be pursued at the dawn of the third millennium.

Because of the Church's vitality, despite shadows, the strong Christian tradition of your area inspires trust in the future and, as you say, there are signs of hope.

2. As you clearly state in your quinquennial reports, among the aspects of pastoral work that worry you *is the question of vocations*. In some of your Dioceses the number of young people who are willing to enter the priesthood or the consecrated life has remained very low, sometimes for years. Priests are increasingly overburdened and have no relief in sight. Nonetheless, far from slackening in their missionary enthusiasm, they tirelessly continue to fulfil their pastoral tasks. I warmly commend their courage and tell them again that they must not despair, for the Lord never abandons his Church. The period of crisis your Dioceses are undergoing must not cause your diocesan communities as a whole to forget that there is a need to continue and redouble their efforts to transmit to the young the call to the priesthood and the consecrated life, but without disparaging the vocation to marriage.

3. Several of you have stressed that today the young hesitate to commit themselves for fear of the future and for lack of witnesses who can be convincing, attractive figures. It is important that priests and the whole Christian people believe that *God continues tirelessly to call* men and women to his service, in the intimacy of their hearts and through the witness of the ecclesial community. Therefore all Christ's faithful must make their contribution to help young people face the future without excessive fear, to enable them to discover the joy of following Christ, to help them have confidence in themselves and patiently to discern the voice of the Lord, as the prophet Eli did with the young Samuel (cf. 1 Sm 3:1-19).

4. In this area, *the family has a specific role* to fill. The young learn the first knowledge of the faith, of prayer and of the practice of virtue particularly from their parents. In the same way, the willingness to respond to a specific vocation comes from the filial disposition of a heart that wants to do the Lord's will and knows that Christ has the words of eternal life (cf. Jn 6:68). Families can be disturbed at seeing their young people commit themselves to following Christ, particularly in a world where Christian life does not represent an attractive social value. I nonetheless invite parents to look with the vision of faith at their children's future, to help young people freely fulfil their vocation; it is at this price that they will be happy in their lives, for the Lord gives those he has chosen the spiritual strength and necessary resources to overcome their difficulties. The total gift of self to the Lord and to the Church is a source of joy and "the synthesis of pastoral charity" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 23). I urge the lay faithful to commit themselves to the pastoral care of vocations and to support young people who show an inclination to dedicate themselves to the Church's service; fortunately some lay people are already engaged in the diocesan vocations service, but this must not remain the concern of only a few.

In this perspective, it is important that *the place of the priest and of consecrated persons be clearly recognized* in Christian communities. In particular, everyone must remember that ecclesial life cannot exist without the presence of a priest, who acts in the name of Christ, the Head of the

Church, and who, in his name, gathers the people around the Lord's table and grants them pardon for their sins. Likewise, the absence of consecrated persons, whether of the contemplative or the active life, can make one forget that commitment to the kingdom of heaven is the primary aspect of all Christian life. It is clear that if young people do not have personal contact with priests or consecrated persons, and if they do not perceive the specific mission of each one of them, it will be difficult for them to envisage such a commitment on their own.

5. You note that the young people who are thinking of the priesthood and the seminarians already in formation have gone through difficult periods in their lives. Some are fragile, sometimes on account of a social or family environment which has been the cause of wounds that are slow to heal, or, as was observed during the recent canonical visits, because of the permanent mobility of families, making it hard for them to have a sense of rootedness, or because of the decadent morals often present in society, or again, because of the recent conversion of certain candidates. Therefore you should *help them structure their personality*, in order to become the spiritual house of which St Peter speaks (cf. 1 Pt 2:5). This requires special attention on your part and on the part of those responsible for vocations services to guide *the discernment phase* and their preparation with care and sensitivity. In particular, it will be essential to see that formation personnel have the required abilities, and that they firmly uphold the essential principles of priestly formation.

For this preparatory phase, some Bishops have chosen to require of candidates, in various forms, *a propaedeutic year*, an initiative that seems to be bringing good results. Thus, at the end of the first phase, candidates should have “certain qualities: a right intention, a sufficient degree of human maturity, a sufficiently broad knowledge of the doctrine of the faith, some introduction into the methods of prayer, and behaviour in conformity with Christian tradition” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 62). So as to be able to deal later with the different tasks of the ministry, these young men must be willing to grow, in order to acquire the psychological, human and Christian maturity necessary for every servant of Christ and the Church. During the propaedeutic year, candidates especially deepen their sense of the theology of election and of the covenant God made with men. Thus they prepare themselves to hear the call of Christ and the Church and to follow in obedience the formation programme proposed by their Bishops and, later, the pastoral missions that will be entrusted to them.

6. As those responsible for calling the candidates who will be your future coworkers in the priesthood, it is your task to determine whether or not to accept candidates from other Dioceses according to the canonical provisions (cf. [can 241-242](#)) recently recalled in the *Instruction on the Admission to Seminaries of Candidates from Other Dioceses or Religious Families*, which the Congregation for Catholic Education has addressed to you. On this subject, acceptance without discernment can be damaging for the young men themselves, who instead of entering into a process of a trusting relationship with and of filial obedience to the Bishop of their Diocese, are sometimes tempted to choose their Diocese of incardination and place of formation according to purely subjective criteria; they become in some way directors of their own formation, according to

their own sensitivities and not to objective criteria. This attitude will undoubtedly weaken their sense of service, their spirit of openness to pastoral work in the Diocese and their availability for the Church's mission.

7. With the entire Bishops' Conference, you are revising the basic spiritual, philosophical, theological and pastoral formation of the young men who are called to the priesthood. I am pleased with the work you are doing to complete a new *Ratio studiorum*, which will then *regulate seminary formation in France*. It is in fact the duty of Bishops, in continual and trusting collaboration with the seminary staff, to organize the studies of candidates for the priestly ministry, for it is you who call them and who, by the imposition of hands, bring them into the diocesan presbyterate.

The seminary is a central institution in the Diocese; it participates in the visible nature of the Body of Christ and in its pastoral dynamism; it contributes to the unity of all the members of the Christian community, because priestly formation goes beyond specific pastoral sensitivities. By carrying out all or part of their course there, seminarians thus have the opportunity to be close to the Bishop, priests and the many local human and ecclesial situations. When there is no diocesan seminary, the Bishop and his co-workers who are guiding the seminarians must maintain organized links with the seminaries where they have sent their candidates. Despite geographical distances, they should also find ways of making these institutions and all their vitality known to the members of the Diocese, especially young people; if they are not known, there is less chance that those who hear the Lord's call will enter them.

8. Composed of people from different walks of life, the seminary must become a family and, in that image, enable each young man, with his own sensitivity, to develop his vocation, to become aware of his future commitments and *to be formed in the community, spiritual and intellectual life* under the guidance of a team of priests and teachers trained specifically for this task. Thus the young men learn to be active members of the presbyterate around the Bishop. Throughout the subsequent stages, emphasis will be put on the unifying principle of all Christian life: love for Christ, for the Church and for mankind, since it is by living in love that one is configured to Christ, Shepherd and High Priest, and it is through love that the Lord's flock is guided. "One cannot in fact be a good pastor, except by becoming one with Christ and with the members of his Body, through charity. Love is the first duty of the good pastor" (St Thomas Aquinas, *On the Gospel of John*, 10, 3). Formation in one's relationship with Christ is thus a priority, through prayer and personal recourse to the sacraments, particularly Reconciliation and the Eucharist which is the school of priestly life; the priest is called to be the icon of Christ in his personal life and in the different functions of his ministry (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 21; *Pastores dabo vobis*, nn. 16, 49). It is also the spiritual life which makes his mission truly effective.

Further, it is appropriate to develop in candidates the practice of the theological and moral virtues, *by training them to discipline their lives and to exercise self-control*. A future priest must also learn

to put his life in the Saviour's hands, to consider himself a member of the diocesan Church and, through her, of the universal Church, and to undertake his activity in the perspective of pastoral charity (cf. Second Vatican Council, *Optatam totius*, nn. 8-9).

Pastoral formation cannot be merely theoretical; seminaries are right to give an important place to pastoral activities in the area, which encourages the young men to put down roots in the local community. However, be sure to continue giving priority to study, for if the serious intellectual enrichment of the courses in the seminary is insufficient, it will be impossible to compensate for it later.

9. All this must go hand in hand with a sound *intellectual, philosophical and theological formation*, which is essential if the young men are to become missionaries, proclaiming to their brothers and sisters the Good News of the Gospel and the Christian mysteries. Study will thus have an important place and will train priests for the ongoing formation indispensable throughout their ministry, because a spiritual life that is not constantly nourished intellectually risks being impoverished. This requires a great love for the truth. The Council's Decree *Optatam totius* has outlined in a remarkably balanced way the main orientations of ecclesiastical studies; it is always appropriate to refer to it (cf. especially nn. 14-17).

Philosophical studies should not be underestimated: they awaken sensitivity to the different human ways of searching for God; they develop a culture that makes it possible to be constantly in dialogue with the world so that it can be invited to turn to Christ; finally, they provide the elements for developing a Christian anthropology, for teaching moral conduct and for taking the Christian mystery into consideration.

Is there any need to stress the privileged place owed to *the study of the word of God*, in order to receive its ever-living message and to be an enlightened witness to it? Of course, a sound foundation in the different branches of theology is indispensable, if priests are to respond to the expectations of their contemporaries to go beyond superficial presentations of the Church's teaching which cannot comfort them in the faith. *The theology of the liturgy*, in particular, enables the ministers of the Eucharist and the other sacraments to celebrate with dignity the mysteries whose stewards they are and to show their full richness and significance to the faithful.

All that can be said of the intellectual formation of future priests and also of the growing need for the formation of the laity leads me to invite you, in view of the years to come, to agree to make the necessary effort to provide a *higher standard of academic formation* for young priests who have an aptitude for it, so that they may have the opportunity to be involved in research and teaching. Moreover, it is also important that you make a special effort to *prepare priests for vocational discernment*, spiritual direction and leadership in community life.

10. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I am aware of your concern for your seminaries. My recent

Apostolic Visit made it clear. I also know of your problems, your anxiety about the small number of seminarians at the present time. That is why I wished to go over certain points with you, without being able to cover them all here. I wanted to encourage you and to assure you once again that the current trial your Dioceses are undergoing can only be understood if one looks at it with faith in the Lord's Cross. And, in the light of Easter, we will hear the Lord tell his disciples, who we are: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20:21).

In hope I join in your prayer for vocations, for seminarians, for priests and for consecrated persons. I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to them, as well as to yourselves and to all the members of your Dioceses.

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