



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE FIRST GROUP OF BISHOPS  
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (REGION OF NEW YORK)  
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Friday, 27 February 1998 Your Eminence,*

*Dear Brother Bishops,*1. Beginning this series of *ad Limina* visits of the Pastors of the Church in the United States, I cordially welcome you, the first group of Bishops - from the ecclesiastical region of New York - and I send warm greetings to all the members of the Bishops' Conference. In meeting you, my first thought is to give heartfelt praise to God for the Catholic community in your country as you seek to be ever more subject to the Lord in love and fidelity (cf. Eph 5:24), pressing forward amid the trials of this world and the consolations of God, announcing the saving cross and death of the Lord until he comes (cf. 1 Cor 11:26). In particular I express my thanks to you and your brother Bishops for the spiritual friendship and the communion in faith and love which unite us in the service of the Gospel. I thank you for all the ways in which you share my pastoral concern for the universal Church. All through the years of my Pontificate I have had countless opportunities to experience the characteristic love and solidarity of the Catholics of the United States for the Successor of Saint Peter. In this year of preparation for the Great Jubilee, dedicated to the Holy Spirit, I pray that "the Lord, the giver of life" will reward the Church in the United States with his strengthening and consoling gifts.2. The Jubilee calls us to remember and celebrate the blessings that the Father has showered upon us in Jesus Christ, the Lord of history and the "chief shepherd" of our souls (cf. 1 Pet 5:4). Freed from sin and washed in the blood of the Lamb, we have truly become children of God, able to turn to him in absolute confidence: for we know that he loves us and will never abandon us. Although our ministry constantly reminds us of the sufferings of so many of our fellow human beings, especially the poor and those who are persecuted for their faith in Christ, we are confident that, as the Third Millennium approaches, God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 86). Through the Incarnation of the Son of God, eternity has entered into time. Time itself has become the dramatic arena in which the history of salvation unfolds; thus anniversaries and jubilees become times of grace - "a day blessed by the Lord", "a year of the Lord" (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 32). The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 will be a time of unique blessings for the Church and for the world, a grace already prepared by that extraordinary ecclesial event of recent times, the Second Vatican Council, the fruits of which are still maturing towards their fullness. Since the documents of the Council represent the fundamental point of reference for the Church's understanding of herself and her mission in this period of history, it is fitting that our preparation for the Jubilee should involve a serious meditation on how we as Bishops have received and implemented the rich body of teaching elaborated by the Council Fathers (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 36). In my

meetings this year with the Bishops of the United States I propose to reflect on certain themes of the Council, in an effort to discern how best we can ensure that all that God wishes for the Church will become a reality.<sup>3</sup> What is the greatest challenge before us as Bishops of the Church? What is the greatest need of our contemporaries? The men and women of today, like those of every time and place, are yearning for salvation. They wish to rediscover the truth of God's dominion over creation and history, to encounter his self-revelation, and to experience his merciful love in all the dimensions of their lives. The great truth to be proclaimed to this and every age is that God has entered human history so that men and women can truly become children of God. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, clearly reminds us that the truth we proclaim is no human wisdom, but depends completely on God's revelation of himself: "God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man has access to the Father in the Holy Spirit and comes to share in the divine nature" (*op. cit.*, 2). This is the heart of the Christian message and the essential truth which Bishops must preach "in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2). In the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, I posed the question: "To what extent has the word of God become more fully the soul of theology and the inspiration of the whole of Christian living as *Dei Verbum* sought?" (No. 36). From everyone, but especially from the Bishops, fidelity to the revealed word requires an attitude of attentive, prayerful receptivity. It requires that we allow ourselves to be renewed and transformed by our encounter with his living word. Then we will be able to help the faithful to understand that Holy Scripture is a gift which we receive within the Church. It is not merely a "text" to be analyzed; it is above all an invitation to communion with the Lord. It must be read and received in a spirit of openness to that invitation. This does not imply an uncritical approach to Scripture, but it does warn against readings informed by a sterile rationalism or by cultural pressures that compromise biblical truth. These approaches close the ear to God's call and empty the sacred text of its power to save (cf. Rom 1:16). Saint Paul gives thanks to God for those who have accepted Scripture for what it really is: the word of God at work in the community of believers (cf. 1 Th 4:13). Tribute must be paid to the many excellent Catholic exegetes and theologians in the United States who have been untiring in their efforts to help the Christian people to understand more clearly the word of God in Scripture, "so that they can better accept [it] in order to live in full communion with God" (*Address on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 23 April 1993, No. 9). This important work will bear the fruit the Council intended if it is sustained by a vigorous spiritual life within the believing community. Only the love that "issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith" (1 Tim 3:5) enables us to understand the language of God who is Love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8).<sup>4</sup> If the new evangelization is to be effective, our catechesis must convey the full truth of the Gospel, for that fullness of truth is the very source of our capacity to teach with authority: an authority which the faithful easily recognize when we address the essentials and deliver what we have received (cf. 1 Cor 15:3). Our teaching office "is not above the word of God but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly (*pie audit*), guarding it scrupulously (*sancte custodit*) and explaining it faithfully (*fideliter exponit*) by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit" (*Dei Verbum*, 10). Through the ministry of preaching and teaching, the whole believing community must come to see and to love Scripture and Tradition, which together lead us to understand God's salvific presence in history and show the path to real communion of life with him. In this way the entire Church will enter more deeply into the mystery of salvation, and will come to appreciate that human history is the place of encounter between God and man, the place in which communion with God is offered, received and built up.<sup>5</sup> The Gospel message remains ever the same, yet we proclaim it in a culture which is undergoing constant transformation. We need to reflect on the dynamics of contemporary culture in order to discern the signs of the times which affect the proclamation of the saving message of Christ. On the one hand, everywhere we see people's desire for freedom and happiness, and this speaks to us of a deep spiritual hunger. People seek to satisfy this hunger in many ways; but the failure of many proposed solutions, be they philosophies, ideologies or

fashions, has led to a great unease, if not a current of despair, in contemporary culture. Ours is often called a time of uncertainty; this uncertainty, raised to a principle by which it is denied that we can ever know the truth of things, affects the moral life, the life of prayer, and the theological correctness of people's faith (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 36). On the other hand, many people are increasingly aware that, in order to build free, just, and prosperous societies and so create the conditions for satisfying the deepest and noblest aspirations of the human spirit, the culture through which they interact and communicate must correspond to certain basic truths about the human person. My last visit to your country took place in 1995, during the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the United Nations Organization. At the General Assembly I expressed the conviction that an acceleration of the human quest for freedom is one of the great dynamics of modern history in every part of the world. That dynamic shows itself clearly in the claims of the world's peoples for a fuller share in determining the political and economic choices which affect them (cf. *Address to the Fiftieth General Assembly of the United Nations Organization*, October 5, 1995, No. 2). In the unfolding of history, do we not see the gradual advance of certain Gospel truths: the dignity of the human person, greater respect for human rights, an overdue recognition of the equal dignity of women, a rejection of violence as a means of resolving conflict? But the affirmation of certain moral values is not yet the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and men (cf. 1 Tim 2:5). Our age needs to hear the revealed truth about God, about man, and about the human condition. The moment is right for *kerygma*. The pastoral challenge of the Great Jubilee is to proclaim with renewed vigor "Jesus Christ, the one Savior of the world, yesterday, today and for ever" (cf. *Heb* 13:8). And the Catholic community in the United States is called to do so in a cultural climate, many of whose most powerful elements doubt the existence of objective, absolute truth and reject the very idea of authoritative teaching. The challenge of radical skepticism can lead to the assumption that the Church is marginal to contemporary life. Accepting this assumption, in turn, can lead to the notion that Catholicism, and indeed Christianity as a whole, is merely one form among many of the generic human reality called "religion". This is not the message of the Second Vatican Council, which boldly proclaimed the centrality for human history of Jesus Christ and the essential mission of the Church to preach the Gospel to all nations: for "there is no other name under heaven given to man by which he must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The Church is sent to the world with a proposal: and the evangelical proposal we make is that the world can understand its history and its aspirations most adequately, most truthfully, through the Gospel. If this is the truth we proclaim, then the Church is never marginal, even when she seems weak in the eyes of the world. Faced with a *modernity* which has lost the capacity to fulfill the noble aspiration it set out to realize - the complete liberation of man, of every man and every woman - the Church remains a witness to the full meaning of human freedom. A new phase in the history of freedom is opening up, and in these circumstances it is necessary that the Church, especially through her Pastors, teach and evince that "the liberating capacities of science, technology, work, economics and political activity will only produce results if they find their inspiration and measure in the truth and love which are stronger than suffering: the truth and love revealed to men by Jesus Christ" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*, March 22, 1986, No. 24). The challenge is enormous, but the time is right. For other culture-forming forces are exhausted, implausible, or lacking in intellectual resources adequate to satisfy the human yearning for genuine liberation - even if those forces still manage to exercise a powerful attraction, especially through the media. The great achievement of the Council is to have positioned the Church to engage *modernity* with the truth about the human condition, given to us in Jesus Christ who is the answer to the question that is every human life. A Bishop's task is none other than this: to be a convincing witness to and a courageous teacher of the truth that makes man free (cf. *Jn* 8:42).<sup>7</sup> Dear Brother Bishops: at the Last Supper, Jesus challenged and encouraged his disciples: "If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home with him" (*Jn* 14:23). We know that the Spirit dwells in the midst of the Church and leads the faithful to an ever

more profound understanding of God's word, because Christ told his disciples that the Spirit "will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you" (Jn 14: 26). May the Spirit always assist you in fulfilling the task which the Council committed above all to the Church's Pastors: that of communicating the truth and grace of Christ to the men and women of today's world (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 2; *Redemptoris Missio*, 1). I commend to the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church and Patroness of the United States, the joys and difficulties of your ministry and the needs and hopes of your local Churches and of the whole Catholic community in your country. To each of you and to all the priests, religious and laity of your Dioceses, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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