



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO CROATIA (OCTOBER 2-4, 1998)
MESSAGE TO THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Split, 4 ottobre 1998

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate!*¹ I am happy to meet with you after yesterday's beatification, at Marija Bistrica, of that watchful and courageous Pastor of this land, Alojzije Stepinac. I greet each of you cordially and I thank you for the brave witness offered so steadfastly to the universal Church and to the world, especially during the tragedy which recently struck this region. Through you, I wish to send my heartfelt and affectionate greeting to the priests and deacons who share with you the apostolic burdens from day to day. With the same fervour I wish to express my appreciation of the evangelical witness offered daily by the men and women religious and by all who have given their lives to the service of their brothers and sisters. Continue with courage your ministry to that portion of the People of God for which you have been appointed priests, pastors and teachers, in communion with the Successor of Peter. I urge you to persevere in imitating all those who, following the Good Shepherd, have offered their lives for Christ's flock and have worked to build the unity of the Church, as did the Blessed Alojzije Stepinac.² The communion of all believers is the clearly declared will of our Redeemer. It is the essential element of every apostolate and the foundation of all evangelization. May God grant you "to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice" (*Rm* 15:5-6) glorify him, building his Kingdom among your people. The Church in Croatia needs to strengthen communion between all its different parts, in order to attain the goals which beckon in the present climate of freedom and democracy. Initiatives designed to promote genuine collaboration among the various sectors of the Church have all my encouragement, and I exhort everyone to grow more ardent, in openness to communion and obedience to the Pastors. This will benefit the entire Christian community. The ability to work together, with respect for the legitimate demands of each, will not fail to produce abundant fruits of faith, hope and love, and will at the same time be a great witness to everyone of unity in Christ. Dear Brother Bishops, "the Church is formed by the people united to their Bishop and by the flock which remains faithful to their shepherd" (Saint Cyprian, Epist. 66, 8: CSEL 3, 2, 733). I wish to encourage you therefore in your daily commitment to consolidate that communion in the Church at all levels, striving to ensure that clergy and faithful are dedicated to the teaching of the Apostles and to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (cf. *Acts* 2:42). Always remain united among yourselves, in communion with the Bishop of Rome and with the

other members of the College of Bishops, in particular with those in Bosnia and Hercegovina.³ The chief task facing your Churches in this moment of history is the renewed proclamation of the Gospel of Christ in every sector of society. It is a task which requires the mobilization of all the Church's active forces: Bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful. In recent decades, your country, like other parts of Eastern Europe, has suffered the tragedy produced by atheistic materialism. Today, in the new democratic climate, it is necessary to give strong support to the new evangelization, so that the human person, the family and society as a whole will not be harmed and fall into the trap of consumerism and hedonism. There is a need to proclaim and bear witness to the values which make life authentic and joyful, satisfying the human heart and filling it with hope of the inheritance prepared by God for his children. The Church in Croatia, therefore, is called to rediscover her own religious and cultural roots in order serenely and confidently to cross the threshold of the new Millennium which is now so near. A further boost to the new evangelization in today's climate will also come from ecumenical dialogue with the other Churches and Christian communities. In harmony with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Do not tire in your vigorous efforts to promote a dialogue of this kind in the hope of coming one day to a common witness to Christ before the world. At the same time, create opportunities for interreligious dialogue, with a view to eliminating needless misunderstandings and fostering mutual respect and cooperation in the service of the human family. All of this must be accompanied by intense prayer and by an active and committed sharing in the sacramental life of the Church – especially the Eucharist – by individuals, families and the entire community. In this time of great shifts and changes, Croatia needs men and women with a living faith, who can bear witness to the love of God for man, and who are prepared to devote their energies to the service of the Gospel. Your nation needs apostles who will go among the people bearing the Good News; Croatia needs prayerful souls who ceaselessly sing the praises of the Most Holy Trinity and raise petitions to "God our Saviour, who wills that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (cf. *1 Tm* 2:4). Your nation also needs lay faithful who are committed to spreading the Gospel in the fields of culture and politics. It is the task of the laity to imbue the world in which they work with the Spirit of Christ for the good of society as a whole.⁴ In order to respond to these needs in an appropriate way, it is necessary to give special attention to the formation of priests, of religious and of all who labour in the Lord's vineyard, just as it is to foster an effective pastoral strategy for promoting vocations. Priests are expected to be genuine, well-integrated and joyful witnesses to Christ and his Gospel, in keeping with the commitments made at the moment of Ordination. Apostolic zeal and pastoral activity must be nourished and sustained by prayer and reflection, so that the priest can first live what he proclaims in word and celebrates daily in the Sacred Mysteries and in the Liturgy of Praise. In this context, the gift of self in celibacy will be for every priest a sign of his unreserved attachment to the plan of the heavenly Father, a plan which the priest makes his own in operative charity and constant communion with Christ the Good Shepherd. The priest's spirituality will be enriched by various devotions and pious practices such as regular confession, meditation, Eucharistic adoration, the Stations of the Cross and the recitation of the Rosary. It is also the Bishop's task to support men and women religious in their total dedication to the Lord, encouraging them to live generously the charism of the Institute to which they belong and to work always in communion with the particular and universal Church.⁵ It is necessary then to find the right ways to help the people of our time to understand and accept God's great plan for humanity. People today need to know and make their own the dignity which God has graciously given them; God who has created them in his own image and likeness (cf. *Gen* 1:26-27), and has redeemed them by the blood of Christ (cf. *Rev* 5:9). In your pastoral activity, the "domestic church" of the family has a special place because "the future of the world and the Church passes through the family" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 75). Families will be able to respond to the challenges and the threats of the contemporary world insofar as they are open to God, living "the mystery of unity and fruitful love which unites Christ and the Church" (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). A family in which "the parents are for their children the first proclaimers of faith by word and example" (*ibid.*) will successfully fulfill its

mission in today's world, becoming a place of faith and love after the example of the Holy Family of Nazareth. People today need a clear understanding of the nature and vocation of the family. Never grow weary, therefore, of making known the Christian view of marriage and the family. In the light of God's word, be aware of what needs to be done in the present circumstances. Let it be your concern and the concern of your priests, with the assistance of expert and properly trained persons, to promote intense and sound pastoral care of the family, in which ample space is given to the defence of life according to the teachings of the Magisterium (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 36). In this respect you must ensure that pastoral workers receive sound training so that they can respond readily to the expectations of engaged and married couples. Be close to families in difficulty, families threatened as communities of love, life and faith, families beset by social and economic problems, or afflicted by suffering. Nor should the pastoral care of young people be forgotten. The future belongs to them; and well trained young people will be able to build good families, and good families will bring up their children well. The pastoral care of families, especially as it involves young people, is clearly way of building the future of the Church and of civil society. The promotion of the dignity of the person and of the family, respect for the right to life, which is especially threatened today, together with the defence of the weakest elements of society, must have a special place in your apostolic concerns, all to "give a soul" to modern Croatia. Faced with the spread of the "culture of death", which appears above all in the practice of abortion and the growing acceptance of euthanasia, there is a need to advance a new "culture of life". To this end, there is need of pastoral initiatives designed to help the men and women of our time to rediscover the profound meaning of life, not only of young and healthy life, but also of life when it is struck by illness. God's word is the true and definitive answer to such questions. The defence of life is part of the Church's mission. In fact, "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1). Today no less than yesterday our brothers and sisters need to know Christ, the One sent by the Father, who has sown in the human heart a seed of new and immortal life, the life of God's children. Pastoral activity in this area must highlight the order which God has placed in man and in the whole of creation.⁶ Dear Brother Bishops, I trust that the Churches over which you preside may always be guided by the Holy Spirit, and may act in accord with his promptings. Together with you, I invoke the protection of the Most Holy Mother of God, Queen of Croatia, and the intercession of all the Saints and Beatified of this region. With these sentiments, I cordially impart to you, to the clergy, to the men and women religious and to all the faithful of your Dioceses my Apostolic Blessing. *From Split, 4 October in the year 1998, the twentieth of my Pontificate.*