



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF SLOVAKIA,
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Monday, 7 September 1998

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am particularly pleased to meet you on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit, which gives us the welcome opportunity to renew our bonds of affection and communion precisely on the day we celebrate the memorial of the Martyrs of Košice, whom I had the joy, three years ago, to enrol among the saints of your country.

I warmly greet your President, Bishop Rudolf Baláž of Banská Bystrica, whom I thank for his sentiments of devotion and attachment to the Successor of Peter expressed on behalf of all those present. I also greet our dear and venerable Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec, who, during the spiritual exercises held this year at the Vatican, enabled us to hear the voice of the tradition of Cyril and Methodius so clearly. And with great affection I also greet each one of you, Pastors of the beloved peoples of Slovakia, among whom I had the joy of staying during my unforgettable visit three years ago.

“The Church, in Christ, is in the nature of a sacrament — a sign and instrument, that is, of intimate union with with God and of the unity of all mankind” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 1). The Second Vatican Council presents the mystery of the Church in these words, stressing their specific reference to the mystery of Christ and the kingdom of God of which she “is on earth the seed and the beginning” (*ibid.*, n. 5). To properly carry out her mission to be “a universal sacrament of salvation” (*ibid.*, n. 48), the Church must be able appropriately to express, both locally and universally, the twofold dimension, human and divine, impressed upon her by her Founder, who was fully involved in the affairs of the world but without becoming part of it (cf. Jn 17:15-16).

2. The Church in Slovakia is also called to be a “universal sacrament of salvation” by lovingly sharing in the joys, sufferings and needs of the Slovak people, aware that she is “on earth, the seed and the beginning of God’s kingdom” and an instrument of Christ’s grace. Awareness of her own mission will lead her to engage in respectful and attentive

dialogue with society and to work for fraternal and supportive harmony, inspired by the values of authentic Christian tradition.

In a situation in which the effects of the harsh communist persecution are still being felt and which risks seeing the destructive divisions of the past rekindled, the Church knows she must be salt and leaven within Slovak society, contributing to the good of all without becoming involved in conflicts between special interests.

The profound changes which have affected Slovakia in recent years, with disturbing results for families and the world of youth, oblige Pastors and faithful to defend the values of their cultural and Christian tradition. This presupposes a profound, clear philosophical and theological analysis of the various intellectual trends, to show their ambiguous features and to correct them, using them as a starting point for a fruitful study of their own doctrinal heritage.

During the time of the former communist regime, the Christian community in Slovakia, often anticipating the Second Vatican Council's conclusions, was able with Gospel fidelity to offer effective and prophetic answers to the challenges of an atheistic society. In the same way, it is called today to respond to the new challenges, committing itself to diligent meditation on the Scriptures, to the careful analysis of social phenomena, to the planning of suitable pastoral initiatives so as to offer, in the light of past experiences, appropriate and incisive responses to the problems posed by the different situations of the present time.

3. In particular, if the Church as "sacrament" is to yield more abundant good fruits, it would be useful for her to be more involved in the areas which belong more directly to her mission.

It will be necessary first of all to promote *the faith formation of adult believers*, encouraging them to carry out their specific tasks to the full. As I emphasized during my Pastoral Visit to your beloved country, "suitably trained lay Catholics have the mission of carrying the Gospel message to all sectors of society, including the political sector" (*Address to the Slovak Bishops*, n. 6; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 12 July 1995, p. 9). Therefore it is not so much a matter of supporting those whose role is to substitute for the priest in his absence, as to help the faithful discover authentic "lay" spirituality as a way to sanctify themselves and the world, starting from the fundamental consecration conferred in Baptism. In this commitment to the formation of lay adults in every field, the service offered by Catholic universities assumes a particular importance. Their specific goal is precisely to give cultural and spiritual formation to people who can bring the values of faith and the Catholic tradition to the civil and political realm.

Secondly, it is necessary to pay special attention to the *formation of the clergy*. Candidates for the priesthood must be well-trained culturally as well as spiritually, so that they can proclaim the Gospel effectively to their contemporaries, drawing from the Church's Magisterium appropriate answers to the various questions. It is also clear that sound doctrine is far more useful than academic qualifications. In addition, they must be helped to preserve themselves from the ever-present danger of activism, by means of a formation which stresses the pre-eminence of the mission to evangelize and "sanctify". Abandoning or giving insufficient attention to these essential dimensions of the priestly mission inevitably leads to losing the sense and effectiveness of the other aspects of the pastoral ministry. The greatest good a priest can offer his people is to give them every possible encouragement for reconciliation with God and their brethren.

To respond to the serious challenges of our time, it is the young man's duty, once he has been ordained a priest, to care for his own continuing formation, in addition to study and personal prayer, by taking part in official meetings and informal gatherings with other priests and their own Bishop, in order to seek together appropriate solutions to problems and to find support in their apostolic efforts. It is precisely in view of their advanced formation that you have the Pontifical Slovak College and the Pontifical Slovak Institute of Sts Cyril and Methodius for Slovak priests in Rome. The time they spend working in the centre of Christianity will enable your priests to complete their intellectual and spiritual formation, so that they can be your effective collaborators in the new evangelization.

4. I congratulate you, Venerable Brothers, on the fact that in recent years it has been possible to provide *religious education in the schools*. However, I would also like to emphasize on this occasion that this form of evangelization does not replace parish catechesis for children, young people and adults. School is certainly an effective aid, but the parish remains the catechetical centre and it must have adequate structures for conducting normal pastoral and formational activities.

It is particularly necessary for the thorough, systematic proclamation of God's word to reach adults, so that they make the Gospel the inspirational centre of their lives and thus courageously bear witness to Christ in the workplace, in culture and in sociopolitical activities. Special courses and other suitable formational activities will contribute to this.

It is above all the *twin realities of family and youth* which must be your Churches' top priority. The negative influences which come from all sides must find effective and appropriate antidotes in the Christian community. To this end it will help to organize a complete youth and family apostolate, aimed at meeting the formational needs of young people and new families. Fittingly in this regard, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has been translated and published in the Slovak language. It is an extraordinary tool for evangelization, and it is now the task of the Church and particularly the Bishops to "translate" its content into the daily life of the faithful.

In the framework of formational efforts for the new generations, you should emphasize the need for a vocations apostolate aimed at presenting to young people the greatness of a vocation to the ministerial priesthood and the consecrated life, as a generous service to the cause of the kingdom.

5. In communion with the whole Catholic world, the Church in Slovakia is also involved now in *preparing for the Jubilee of the Year 2000*, which is rapidly approaching. This is why she is not only fostering an atmosphere of expectation for that historical event, but is rightly seeking to live intensely the immediate years of preparation, according to the ecclesial itinerary I proposed in the Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*. The review *Vel'lké jubileum*, laudably edited by the Slovak Bishops' Conference, will provide effective help in this regard to the various diocesan and parish communities.

In this context it is natural to mention the means of social communication. How can we fail to stress their great influence on public opinion and their extraordinary impact on the way the faithful think and act? In view of the negative influence they sometimes exert it is not enough to criticize, but it is essential to educate the faithful in the mature use of the mass media, helping them to grow towards greater freedom. It is also necessary to make every effort to direct the unique potential of these instruments to the service of truth and goodness.

6. The Church offers man the salvation achieved by Christ, according to the Father's plan, in the paschal mystery. She reaches out to man and accepts him as he is, with all his intellectual and moral failings, with all his family and social problems. Nevertheless, the Church is aware that she does not have a ready-made solution to every new question raised by changing circumstances. Rather, she stands beside each person to encourage his own responsibility and to invite him to *seek a suitable response* in the light of Christian wisdom, accumulated in the documents of the Magisterium (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 43).

The relationship between Church and State should be considered in this context. As the Second Vatican Council emphasizes: "The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields" (ibid., n. 76). However, this distinction does not exclude, but calls for mutual collaboration. As I recalled on the occasion of an audience to a group of Slovak pilgrims: "Catholics must not remain on the fringes of social and political life. Indeed, they can and must make a significant contribution, inspired by the Church's social teaching and without ever taking refuge in preconceived or one-sided positions which are often sterile if not harmful" (*Address to Slovak Pilgrims*, 9 November 1996, n. 3; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 20 November 1996, p. 6).

In the special collaboration of Church and State in promoting the good of the individual and the country, the fact that the Church by her very nature has been sent to all, both near and far, can never be considered secondary.

Venerable and dear Brothers, these are the thoughts and exhortations I felt the need to express to you on the occasion of your welcome ad limina visit. I thank you for your enthusiasm and dedication in working for the true good of the communities entrusted to your pastoral care. Always foster a deep sense of affective and effective communion among yourselves and with the universal Church, and in particular with the Successor of Peter.

As I entrust you, together with your communities, to the maternal protection of Our Lady of Sorrows, patroness of Slovakia, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the Slovak people.

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