



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF LAOS AND CAMBODIA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Thursday, 11 February 1999

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

Dear Father Administrator,

1. I welcome you with great joy on the occasion of your pilgrimage to the tomb of the Apostles. You, the Pastors of the Catholic Church in Laos and Cambodia, have come together for the first time to meet the Successor of Peter for your *ad limina* visit. I sincerely hope that your stay will enable you to vitalize the spirit of collegiality among you, in communion with the Bishop of Rome. May this be a time of grace that will help you make the communities entrusted to your pastoral care grow in faith, hope and charity, in close union with the universal Church!

I thank the President of your Episcopal Conference, Bishop Yves Ramousse, for his cordial words on your behalf. They movingly recall the trials your people have undergone in recent years and shed light on the vitality of your communities which are experiencing a spiritual rebirth full of hope for the future.

At these privileged moments of communion with your local Churches, I turn to the priests, religious and all the faithful of your country. On your return, please bring them the Pope's affectionate greeting and encouragement, so that they will continue to be generous witnesses to the Father's love for all men! Please also convey my warm greetings to the peoples of Cambodia and Laos, whose courage and desire to build fraternal, prosperous nations I recognize!

2. I give thanks to the Lord with you for the heroic fidelity shown by the disciples of Christ at the time your nations were subjected to terrible sufferings, when they saw countless innocent victims of blind violence and the denial of human dignity. Many priests, religious and lay people have given their lives, after the Lord's example, mingling their blood with that of their brothers and sisters and facing their trials with dignity and strength of mind. May no one ever forget this

admirable witness! It is a reminder that belonging to Christ is a sign of contradiction to the world, today as in the past, and that "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27).

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I know the selfdenial with which you have served and continue to serve the Church in your countries. Several of you have been imprisoned or exiled, while some of your brothers gave their lives for their flock, following the Good Shepherd's example. Today, you often have to exercise your episcopal ministry in difficult situations. Be assured that the Successor of Peter is close to each of you in your apostolic sufferings and in your joys and hopes.

3. While the new situations in your countries allow for the rebirth of Christian communities, I encourage you always and everywhere to be fervent witnesses to the hope you bear and which gives you life. To preserve within you this gift of the Lord and to give the Church in your countries a new apostolic vigour, shepherd God's flock which is entrusted to your care, eagerly tending it as God wills and becoming examples to it (cf. 1 Pt 5:2-3).

Sent by Christ to the particular Church of which you are in charge, you have primary responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel. To do this as servants of the truth, you must proclaim with humility and perseverance that Christ is the one and only Saviour of man and that to believe in him "means believing that love is present in the world and that this love is more powerful than any kind of evil in which individuals, humanity or the world are involved" (Encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, n. 7).

You have also received the mission to lead the faithful on the path of holiness and to ensure that they benefit as fully as possible from the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, the memorial of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord who builds up the Church. In presiding over the ministry of charity by which the whole community witnesses to its participation in the mission of Christ, sent "to preach the Good News to the poor" (Lk 4:18), be imitators of the Good Shepherd who has compassion for the misfortunes and weakness of his people and draws close to all who suffer.

4. To lighten the burden of your apostolic duties, your priests, who are still very few, often experience difficult conditions in their lives and ministry. I greet them affectionately and encourage them to persevere in their generous service to the People of God and in their contribution to proclaiming the Good News of salvation. May they remember that, since they can always rely on divine strength, they are never alone in their work! May Christ, who called them to share in his mission, help them with his grace so that they can give themselves to their ministry with total trust. May they be the men of faith and prayer that the world needs! I invite them to foster among themselves a growing spirit of priestly fraternity and cooperation so that your joint pastoral efforts will bear fruit. In conformity with their vocation as pastors, may they give priority to the spiritual service of the faithful entrusted to them, so that they may be led to the One they represent while continuing to be men of mission and dialogue for everyone!

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, treat your priests "as sons and friends, just as Christ calls his disciples no longer servants but friends" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 28). To encourage ever greater communion in the Church, I also invite you to involve them fraternally in the administration of your ecclesiastical territories, with respect for the directives of the Second Vatican Council and the norms of canon law.

Men and women religious, whether they are natives of your land or from elsewhere, should fully share in the Church's evangelizing work with selfdenial and courage, giving a special place to the care of society's poorest and weakest. I warmly thank them on the Church's behalf for their eloquent witness of charity in sacrificing themselves totally for the love of God and their brothers and sisters. Consecrated life has made a great contribution to establishing and developing the Church in your countries; I hope you will continue to devote particular pastoral care to it, so that its active and contemplative forms may be promoted and its proper nature safeguarded for the service of God's kingdom.

I am pleased to know that vocations to the priesthood and the religious life are becoming more numerous. I congratulate you on your concern for vocations and for your praiseworthy efforts to form the young people who agree to follow Christ in serving the Church. The organization of a seminary will be important for the future of the priestly ministry and brotherhood.

To all the young people who answer the Lord's call and to their families, express the Pope's gratitude for the generous gift they are ready to make to the Church and to Christ! Tell them that Peter's Successor gives thanks to God for all who willingly become workers in the harvest and for those who guide them!

5. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I would like to take this occasion to let the laity of your Dioceses know of my deep appreciation of their fidelity to Christ, at times to the point of heroism, especially when in some regions they were deprived of priests for many years. Today, despite their small numbers and sometimes the distance from a parish centre, they devotedly take part in the life of their communities, courageously assuming their responsibilities in the Church's mission. May they never tire of "maintaining" indeed of making ever more deeply rooted in their mind, heart and life "an ecclesial consciousness, which is ever mindful of what it means to be members of the Church of Jesus Christ, participants in her mystery of communion and in her dynamism in mission and the apostolate" (Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, n. 64).

To enable the faithful, youth and adults, to acquire "an ever-clearer discovery of [their personal] vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfil [their] mission" (ibid., n. 58), they must be able to benefit from a sound catechesis on the truths of the faith and its concrete implications in their lives. Thus they will be helped in leading lives which combine the demands of their commitment to following Christ with their family and social activity. This formation, given and received in the Church, will enable sound Christian missionary communities to be formed.

During the difficult periods you have been through, the Christian family has played an essential role in preserving the faith. It is therefore indispensable for parents to pass on to their children what they themselves received. In basing family life on love, simplicity, concrete commitment and daily witness, the fundamental values which constitute it will be defended against the disintegration which all too often in our day threatens this most important institution of society. I therefore invite you to help families to "be "of one heart and soul" in faith, through the shared apostolic zeal that animates them, and through their shared commitment to works of service in the ecclesial and civil communities" (Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 50).

6. Ancient and noble civilizations developed in your countries. They were deeply marked by the great religious traditions of Asia, rich in wisdom and culture, particularly Buddhism which is the traditional religion of the majority of the region's inhabitants. Christianity itself has been there for more than four centuries.

In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the Church looks with respect and esteem on your peoples - deeply rooted cultural and spiritual wealth, which is also part of humanity's heritage. While firmly believing that Christ is the one Saviour of the world, the Church seeks "to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture" (Declaration *Nostra aetate*, n. 2). In a fraternal attitude which respects the freedom of each individual, she would like to share with people of good will the message of hope and peace she has received from her Founder and, in mutual understanding, to collaborate with them in defending human life and dignity and promoting reconciliation, justice and harmony among all. Thus she intends to express her will to contribute, in her own way, to building a society of ever greater solidarity and more in conformity with the greatness of the human person.

The Gospel message cannot be considered a foreign culture to be implanted from the outside, for the saving plan of God embraces all individuals and all peoples. It is therefore important that the Gospel should be proclaimed, welcomed and deeply incarnated in the culture of your peoples. I am delighted with the recent publication of the first ecumenical translation of the Bible in the Khmer language, which enables numerous Christians in your region to receive the Word of God in their own tongue.

7. In recent years the Church, with the generous help of volunteers from many different countries, has been dedicated in various ways to helping refugees and persons in distress, regardless of their individual political choices. She has helped them to be reintegrated into their country and has cared for those who remained abroad. Today, wherever she is permitted to, she works courageously to rehabilitate persons whose lives have been threatened by human violence and those affected by the natural disasters which have struck the region. She also continues in her firm commitment to the definitive abolition of anti-personnel land-mines, those inhuman weapons which

are still claiming so many victims in your countries.

Following her Lord's example, the Church intends, through her committed solidarity on behalf of human beings, to combat all that enslaves the human person and threatens his life, thereby participating with everyone in the nation's reconstruction. I warmly encourage you to continue your generous and disinterested work at the service of your countries - peoples, particularly the weakest. In this way you will help to promote the values of God's kingdom and become a sign of hope for many. We can also welcome with satisfaction today the efforts made towards greater freedom, which enables the Church to continue her commitment to the progress and wellbeing of all.

8. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, at the end of our meeting, I invite you once again to advance courageously towards the future. Among the peoples of Laos and Cambodia, may Catholics be signs of life-giving hope! I hope your nations will progress, with their leaders, in establishing an ever more fraternal and united society, in which lasting peace will enable everyone to find prosperity and to grow humanly and spiritually.

Assure each of your communities, as well as their members who still live far from their homeland, of the Pope's spiritual closeness! As we prepare to enter the third millennium, I invite them to place all their hope in Christ the Saviour and to let themselves be guided by him. I repeat to the young people of your communities that the Church is counting on their generosity and zeal.

I commend your faithful, whose great Marian devotion is frequently expressed in magnificent works of art, to the protection of the Mother of our Saviour, Mother of all human beings, and I warmly impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all.