



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF CROATIA ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT

Saturday, 13 March 1999

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. "To him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever!" (Eph 3:20-21).

Dear Pastors of the Church in Croatia, I am pleased to greet you and to offer you my fraternal welcome with the words of the Apostle to the Gentiles. You have come on your *ad limina* visit to reaffirm your communion with the Successor of Peter, "perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the Bishops and of the whole company of the faithful" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23).

Meeting you during these days in Rome brings back the unforgettable memory of the two Pastoral Visits God granted me to make to your beloved homeland in September 1994 and last October. These were providential occasions during which I had the joy of experiencing the Croatian people's faith. Following the mandate entrusted to me by the Lord, I strengthened these brothers and sisters in the faith, encouraged them in hope, so that their love might be more intense and deep. In a certain sense, today's meeting completes those apostolic journeys which I made as a "Pilgrim of the Gospel".

I thank Metropolitan Archbishop Josip Bozanić of Zagreb for the cordial words which, as President of your Episcopal Conference, he offered me in the name of all, expressing the expectations and hopes which animate the particular Churches of which you have been made true and authentic teachers and pontiffs (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 20; *Christus Dominus*, n. 2) and dispensers of grace (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 26).

I am particularly pleased to be able to greet the Pastors of Poega and Varadin, two recently

created Dioceses, as well as the Military Ordinary, who have come on an *ad limina* visit for the first time. This is an eloquent sign of the Church's growth in Croatia and of her apostolic and missionary vitality.

At this time I would also like to mention venerable Cardinal Franjo Kuharić, Archbishop emeritus of Zagreb, whom I thank for all he has done for the Church in Croatia and for what he continues to do to teach the new generations about the great figure of his predecessor, Bl. Alojzije Stepinac.

2. The meetings I have had with each of you in the past few days have given me an idea of the plans and expectations, difficulties and potential, joys and anxieties that mark your daily ministry. As I thank the Lord for the good you are doing in your Dioceses, I would like to assure you of my constant spiritual closeness. Beloved and venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, continue on the path you have taken to build up God's kingdom in your land, which after some particularly difficult times is now experiencing a new and promising springtime of religion.

When I came to your country last year, I wished to recall at our first meeting that "it is fundamentally important that the Croatian people *remain faithful to their Christian roots*, while at the same time remaining open to the demands of the present which, if it has its difficult problems, offers as well consoling reasons for hope". In particular, I added: "I trust especially that Christians will give a decisive impulse to the new evangelization, offering in all generosity their witness to Christ the Lord, Redeemer of man" (*Arrival speech in Zagreb*, 2 October 1998; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 7 October 1998, p. 3). Today I renew this fervent plea: consider evangelization an urgent pastoral priority! Renewed in its forms and adapted to new needs, it must nevertheless continue to uphold the authentic and unchanging message of the Gospel without compromise. No individual, family or social milieu should be excluded from the Gospel proclamation, because the "Good News" must reach and penetrate every person's life, wherever he lives and works, suffers and rejoices.

Evangelization is a task for all the members of God's People and this is why, as I had the occasion to emphasize last year in Split, "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" (*Message to the Croatian Bishops*, 4 October; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 14 October 1998, p. 7). In this way she will be able to bear great witness of unity in Christ to everyone and to meet old and new challenges, by responding to the expectations of all who, moved by the Holy Spirit, search for the truth and want to give full meaning to their lives.

Make it your priority, venerable Brothers, to help all the faithful answer the universal call to holiness. To do this, never tire of pointing out to those entrusted to your apostolic care the pure, inexhaustible sources of grace, that is, the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and Penance. Strengthened by the gifts of grace, may every Christian community, in communion with its Pastors, be seen as a joyous family of God, where priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful grow

together in fidelity and in love for Christ and for their brethren

3. There is another reason which makes the proclamation of the Gospel to our contemporaries even more urgent: the preparation for the forthcoming Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. In this perspective, it is necessary to identify new paths and seek new opportunities for preaching the Gospel message and for bearing Christian witness, by making the most of the great religious, spiritual, human and cultural resources of God's People. Only in this way will believers be able to offer society their own specific contribution towards authentic development and harmonious material and spiritual growth.

Various forms of pastoral activity in the parish and the Diocese, as well as in the Ecclesiastical Provinces and the Episcopal Conference, will give a further impetus to the new evangelization. In this regard they are a significant reference- point for the celebrations commemorating the 13 centuries of the Croatian people's adherence to Christianity, celebrations which began in Solin in 1975 and ended in Marija Bistrica in 1984. How can one not mention the happy initiative, started in that period, of daily prayer which in the evening hour gathers Croatian Catholics in a harmonious communion of praise and thanksgiving for the gift of faith and prayer for present and future needs? The zeal, discernment and far-sightedness of the Pastors of that time certainly did not lack the Holy Spirit's inspiration and impulse. I am sure that you too will continue to walk on this path, listening to what the Spirit says today to the Churches the Lord has entrusted to your care (cf. Rv 2:7).

4. May you never lack apostolic zeal and the Gospel way of thinking and acting. You are called to be teachers of faith, heralds of hope, witnesses of charity. May concern for priestly vocations and those of special consecration, as well as for the continuing religious formation of the lay faithful, be at the centre of your thoughts.

In my experience as a Pastor, I have seen proof of how important it is for seminaries and places of formation in general to be the "apple of the Bishop's eye". Fostering vocations, however, is a duty that concerns the whole Christian community (cf. *Optatam totius*, n. 2). Indeed, vocations arise within the Christian community and it is here that they are strengthened. In time, it will be the same Christian community which will enjoy the fruits of its commitment to vocations.

The best way to deal with the social and spiritual crisis which has also involved your country is to strengthen the religious sense of life by helping Christian families to be an environment and school where the perennial human and Gospel values are practised and passed on. Young people need eloquent examples that help them not to lose the ideals which transcend the immediate and the contingent; they need a witness of life that is permeated by faith, in order to open themselves to broader and more demanding horizons. How important is the witness given by Bishops, priests and consecrated persons who are generously conformed to Jesus Christ and are completely dedicated to the disinterested service of God and neighbour!

Dear Brothers, help the young generations to follow faithfully the call God gives to each person, in the Church and in society. In particular, provide candidates for the priesthood with a formation adapted to the ministry which will be entrusted to them. Take fraternal care of priests, your closest co-workers. They are not employees acting in the Church's name, but servants and preachers of the Gospel, ministers of God's grace. Made to share in Christ's priesthood and united with the Bishop in their ministry, they are sent to the individual ecclesial communities to assist the Bishop in caring for the entire People of God. If they are to fulfil their tasks properly, their life must be rooted in Christ, a blameless example of holiness and prayer, filled with a deep sense of the Church. Dear Brothers, see that together with you they are always and everywhere examples to the flock entrusted to your pastoral care (cf. 2 Tm 4:12; 1 Pt 5:3).

5. The Church has always had a particular esteem for vocations and the work of consecrated persons, since they are a great spiritual resource that God offers his people. Their charisms are given for the growth and mission of the Church as well as for their personal sanctification, since the special gifts of the Spirit "directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men and to the needs of the world" (CCC, n. 799). Therefore, as I had the occasion to recall: "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" (*Message to the Croatian Bishops*, 4 October 1998; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 14 October 1998, p. 7).

If the pastoral governance of parishes is primarily the diocesan clergy's responsibility, nevertheless consecrated persons have the mission of bearing witness to the real harmony of the various charisms that serve the good of the Church. True charisms build up Christ's Mystical Body in charity, obedience and the unconditioned following of the Divine Master. Venerable Brothers, support men and women religious with your prayer, your affection and your help, so that they will always be faithful to their vocation. With their gifts and in communion with you, they will be able to make an effective contribution to pastoral work by putting their energies at the service of the evangelization of all society.

6. All our energies need to be gathered for the new evangelization. In this last part of the century, we see the material and moral ruins left by so many ideologies: in the last century we have seen the collapse of long and oppressive dictatorships. Even your country, after experiencing a period of trial, now enjoys a time of peace and freedom. However, you must be on guard that the path of legitimate freedom with respect for all human rights is taken. Your role as Pastors, always dedicated to the true good of your flock, is to call constant attention to the perennial principles and unchanging values established by the Creator, on which the dignity of every person and every nation is based.

To be able to address and resolve in a positive way the problems facing society and the Church in

Croatia, which have deep roots in history, it is necessary to have a spirit of charity, patient endurance and shrewd far-sightedness. Only in this way will the saplings of freedom and democracy grow and become sturdy trees. Dear Pastors of the beloved Church in Croatia, together with your priests, teach the faithful to be the light and salt of society (cf. Mt 5:13-14). Christians in turn will be able to help give "a new face to their country " by taking on public duties, fulfilling them as true believers in Christ and promoting the common good with justice and a spirit of solidarity (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, nn. 43, 75). On your part, may you offer them the ongoing religious formation that will help them live and work in harmony with the faith they profess.

Taking your inspiration from the parable of the weeds and the wheat (cf. Mt 13:24-30), help them so that constructive dialogue and edifying love will always prevail over destructive criticism. A consistent commitment is necessary always and everywhere, so that faith can work through love (cf. Gal 5:6), and its benefits will reach everyone, particularly the poor and marginalized.

The Second Vatican Council recalls that Christians, "holding loyally to the Gospel, enriched by its resources and joining forces with all who love and practise justice, have shouldered a weighty task here on earth and they must render an account of it to him who will judge all men on the last day. Not everyone who says: "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of the Father, and who vigorously put their hands to the work" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 93).

The Church and the political community are independent in their own spheres, but both are devoted to serving the same human beings (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 76). Sound and fruitful collaboration between Church and State for the good of all the country's citizens is certainly fostered by mutual respect and reciprocal understanding, which have been increased by the four recent accords signed by the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia.

7. "Stand firm in the Lord" (Phil 4:1). "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word" (2 Thes 2:16-17). Dear Brothers, understand how the Apostle's words are addressed to you and from them draw comfort in order to persevere in generously fulfilling your mission.

May the Holy Mother of God, so beloved and venerated in your lands, accompany your apostolic efforts and all your projects in the Church's service with her powerful intercession and implore an abundance of grace and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ for you and for your Dioceses.

With these sentiments, I am pleased once again to give my Apostolic Blessing to you, to your priests and to your religious, as well as to all the lay faithful in your homeland and abroad.

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