



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE BISHOPS OF PORTUGAL
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Tuesday 30 November 1999

Dear Pastors of the Church in Portugal!

1. Your presence here for your *ad limina* visit gives me great joy and satisfaction, knowing that I am a brother among brothers who share with me my "anxiety for all the Churches" (2 Cor 11: 28); indeed your visit is an expression and a celebration of that special bond of communion which unites us in the Episcopal College as successors of the Apostles. Welcome! In the person of each of you I welcome and greet the priests and deacons, consecrated persons and all the Christian faithful of the various Dioceses of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Braga, Évora and Lisbon.

I thank Bishop António Marcelino for his greeting in which, as Vice-President of your Episcopal Conference, he described the situation of the Church in Portugal, her fidelity to Christ and the great challenges facing her at the moment. I fervently hope your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul will be filled with blessings and consolations from on high so that, *strengthened with new vigour* in your service to the particular Churches that divine Providence has entrusted to your care, you can continue, with humble and joyful hearts, to praise God for the abundant graces you experience and spread day after day through your pastoral ministry, since you have been anointed by the Spirit and sent *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour* (cf. Lk 4: 18-19).

2. Trusting in the great goodness of the heart of our God, let us hope, *within a month* and in fulfilment of our mission as stewards of the grace of Redemption, that we will *be able to open and enter through the sacred doors of our basilicas, cathedrals and co-cathedrals, imploring the full indulgence* and heavenly forgiveness for the sins of all humanity which, 2,000 years ago, saw the Only-begotten Son of God, our Saviour, come down to earth and assume our human nature.

Since it is taking place shortly before the beginning of the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation, I would like to make the most of this special meeting with the Portuguese Church to tear down for her own benefit - if I may use this metaphor - a wall behind the Holy Door which still prevents it from being opened. On the other hand, in recent years many worthwhile initiatives have been promoted both by your Episcopal Conference and by each of the Dioceses; I mention - only as an example, as it would be impossible to compile an exhaustive list - the successive Letters and Pastoral Instructions published in the years of preparation for the Jubilee, and the many Diocesan Assemblies (some of which were explicitly synodal) convoked to prepare and to increase the ecclesial community's awareness of this year of grace which will bring us into the new Christian millennium. Yes, many effective projects have been implemented. Perhaps it is necessary to knock at the door of each person, *at the heart of each individual*, because this is where the *ultimate and decisive possibility of openness and acceptance of the Jubilee* is found. This is why I told you that I would like to take advantage of this collegial meeting to tear down, with you, the "wall" that might still be preventing Portuguese hearts from entering into the Jubilee grace through the "Holy Door" which is the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Esteemed Brothers, it is God's will that *the grace of the Jubilee be extended* - according to each individual's adherence and response to the action of the Holy Spirit - to all the Catholic faithful, to all Christians "who have been baptized and share the same faith in the Lord Jesus" (Bull *Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 4), and also to *all the "brothers and sisters in the one human family"* who will together cross "the threshold of a new millennium", and whose expectations, problems and solutions, because of their increasing globalization, will require harmonious collaboration on everyone's part.

In fact, a reading of the times indicates globalization, but the diagnosis of the human heart is not encouraging: there is an enormous sense of emptiness; there is also a deep repugnance to this emptiness which fills it with fleeting trivialities, increasing its loss of direction. Not knowing how to find itself on its own, it cannot find itself among others: it ends up quite alone in the midst of an anonymous crowd. Well then! The Church offers the Holy Year to this perplexed human heart, disappointed and deceived by the most varied forms of alienation, as a *favourable time to enter into itself and fully experience the life for which it yearns*. This is the Church's prayer, since "the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us" (1 Jn 1: 2) in Jesus of Nazareth.

With his coming, our history ceased to be arid ground, as it had appeared before and without the Incarnation, and acquired meaning and the value of universal hope. In fact, "by his Incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22); "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1: 12). In this way, the Christian way of life not only gives meaning to what exists, but also opens "to all

people the prospect of being "divinized" and thus of becoming more human" (Bull *Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 2). Divine love penetrates their hearts and, through Baptism, gives them rebirth as children of God, making them members of Christ's Body which is the Church.

4. This fullness of life does not come essentially from ideas or the clear and precise reasoning about salvation that an individual seeks to achieve, but from the union of love that is established between Jesus and his faithful, and through Jesus with the Father. We must *overcome the rather widespread tendency to reject any salvific mediation and to put the individual sinner in direct contact with God*, because salvation came to us first of all from the mediation of Jesus' historical humanity and then, since the Resurrection, through his Mystical Body, the Church. Consequently, God's plan is sacramental, that is, he makes himself present in a finite figure such as the humanity of Jesus or the sacramental signs of the Church.

At the school of faith, we learn that "for a Christian, *the sacrament of Penance is the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of serious sins committed after Baptism...* It would therefore be foolish, as well as presumptuous, to wish arbitrarily to disregard the means of grace and salvation which the Lord has provided and, in the specific case, to claim to receive forgiveness while doing without the sacrament which was instituted by Christ precisely for forgiveness" (Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, n. 31). The Church "would be lacking an essential aspect of [her] being and failing in an indispensable function if the "message of reconciliation" (2 *Cor* 5: 19) were not proclaimed with clarity and tenacity, in season and out of season, and if the gift of renunciation were not offered to the world" (ibid., n. 23). To this end, a few theoretical statements are not enough; precise ministerial functions at the service of penance and reconciliation are required.

Therefore, dear Brothers, never cease to remind your priests of ecclesiastical discipline in this regard, helping them to carry it out effectively: "All to whom the care of souls is committed by reason of an office are obliged to provide that the confessions of the faithful entrusted to their care be heard when they reasonably ask to be heard and that the opportunity be given to them to come to individual confession on days and hours set for their convenience" (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 986). Given that "the People of God have entered into the Holy Years, seeing them as a time when Jesus' invitation to conversion makes itself more deeply felt" (Bull *Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 5), *may one of the fruits of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 be the general return of the Christian faithful to the sacramental practice of Confession.*

5. In the parable of the prodigal son (cf. *Lk* 15: 11-32), the Father's embrace is followed by the festive banquet given for the son who had been found. In the same way, because of sacramental pardon he "can once more take part in the Eucharist as the sign that he has found communion with the Father and with his Church" (*Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 9). We know that "in the sign of the consecrated Bread and Wine, Christ Jesus risen and glorified, the light of the nations, reveals the enduring reality of his Incarnation" (ibid., n. 11). It is he who is being celebrated: it is his

2,000th anniversary. And *2,000 years later*, "he remains living and real in our midst in order to nourish the faithful with his Body and Blood" (ibid., n.11).

In the Eucharist, we really have the Holy Door of the Jubilee, Christ the Lord, who said of himself: "I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (*Jn 10: 9*). Beloved Pastors of the Portuguese Church, it is towards these pastures that we are leading the flock entrusted to us: with our best efforts and supported by the power of the Holy Spirit, we proclaim, celebrate and lead people to the Eucharistic Jesus. But how many follow us? How many ignore our call? The census on Sunday Mass attendance which you conducted in 1991 showed that *an average of 26 per cent of Portugal's resident population practise the faith*; this is an important indication of the immense need for pastoral work, but also a serious concern if one thinks that almost three times as many habitually live without the Eucharist.

If, in the multiplication of the loaves (cf. *Lk 9: 12-17*), the disciples had not given the crowd what remained of the five loaves and two fish blessed by the divine Teacher, it would certainly have been impossible to say that "all ate and were satisfied". Now, with regard to Portugal and the Eucharist, we should recognize that many have not eaten and few are satisfied. Of course, the generosity of the Church in providing Christ with "the five loaves and two fish" is not lacking, just as their multiplication is not lacking. The apostolic zeal expressed in your pastoral initiatives and activities is truly admirable, and the pastoral decisions and projects you have prepared are praiseworthy. However, has the utmost been done to take a piece to everyone? Has that necessary review of life been made to see whether everyone has eaten and been satisfied?

I am sure that with sensitive pastoral pedagogy, you will be able to make this Holy Year a *favourable time to lead non-practising Christians* from occasional and self-centred, so to speak, participation (to obtain the gift of the indulgence) in the celebration of the Eucharist, *to being accustomed and committed to weekly participation*, like the martyrs of Abitina (304), who said: "We cannot live without the Lord's Supper" (Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, n. 46). May every Eucharist during the Jubilee have and exert all the fascination and mystery of Christmas, since "for 2,000 years, the Church has been the cradle in which Mary places Jesus and entrusts him to the adoration and contemplation of all peoples" (*Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 11)! Every Eucharist must first of all offer its participants the opportunity for a meeting and personal conversation with the divine Emmanuel, God-with-us (cf. *Mt 1: 23*), the result of which will be spiritual and, if possible, sacramental communion.

6. As we all know, here we find the secret of the fidelity and perseverance of Christians, of the security and solidity of their interior "house" amid the afflictions and hardships of the world; in fact, the Gospel teaches that *the stability of a house essentially depends*, not on the violence of the storms or the fury of the winds, but *on whether or not it has been built on rock* (cf. *Mt 7: 24-27*). Recently too, the Second Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops called for reinvigorating the inner foundations of that "dwelling of God" which is every Christian, every ecclesial community,

the whole of humanity which received God made man: "In a society and culture often closed to the transcendent, stifled by consumerist attitudes, enslaved by old and new idolatries, let us rediscover with awe the sense of 'mystery'. Let us renew our liturgical celebrations, so that they may be a more eloquent sign of the presence of Christ the Lord. Let us ensure new space for silence, prayer and contemplation" (*Final Message*, n. 5). Therefore it is necessary to *avoid the reefs of activism* where the best pastoral programmes and so many lives dedicated to the limits of their strength have been shipwrecked, and *of secularism*, where God has no voice and no place, which prevents his coming down to our earth.

Esteemed Brothers, as sentinels of God's House, see that all ecclesial life reflects in a way the twofold rhythm of Holy Mass with the liturgy of the word and the Eucharistic liturgy. Take as your example the case of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who only recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread (cf. *Lk 24: 13-35*). In recent decades some people, in reaction to an excessive sacramentalism, have put the primary, if not the exclusive, emphasis on the word. Now, according to the Council's teaching, the "economy of Revelation is realized by deeds and words, which are intrinsically bound up with each other. As a result, the works performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and bear out the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the mystery they contain" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 2). In conclusion, we need the word - the "the word of God which is at work in you believers" (*1 Thes 2: 13*) - and the sacrament which makes present and extends in history the saving action of Jesus.

7. Dear Brothers, these are a few thoughts which I leave with you on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit about a month before the opening of the Holy Door. Desiring to open it wide so that all the People of God can enter and quench their thirst at the springs of salvation, I do not want any "wall" to block the access of Portuguese Christians to the special grace of the Lord associated with the Jubilee of the Year 2000 (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 55). At Fátima we find a shining example of the personalization of the apostolic plans and commitments which must be taken up and bear fruit in every Christian's heart; teaching them as a mother, Our Lady asks the shepherd children: "Do you want to offer yourselves to God?". "Yes, we do", they reply to her (Apparition, 13 May 1917). Francisco and Jacinta are soon to be raised to the honour of the altars, extending the Mother of God's appeal to the whole Church by the example of their lives.

With this appeal I ask you to convey my encouragement to the priests, deacons, consecrated persons, seminarians, novices and pastoral workers, the Christian faithful and all who seek Christ's truth, as well as to Christian families and parish communities. Be assured of my constant prayers for the Church in Portugal on pilgrimage to heaven, so that all her members can courageously and generously respond to the year of grace about to begin. Invoking upon everyone the happiness of the Triune God's embrace, I wholeheartedly impart to you my Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to your closest collaborators and to all the faithful of your Dioceses.

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