



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BRAZIL
FROM THE NORTH EAST REGION 2
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 28 September 2002

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I receive you today with joy, Pastors of God's Church in Brazil from the Metropolitan See of Olinda and Recife, Paraíba, Maceió and Natal and the suffragan dioceses. These Churches possess a rich spiritual and missionary tradition - one of them was sanctified by the martyrdom of priests, religious and lay people - and have been enriched by the sound virtues of numerous Christian families who consolidated the faith in your country. You have come to Rome for this *ad limina* visit, a venerable institution that helps to keep alive the close bonds of communion that unite every bishop with the Successor of Peter. Your presence also makes me feel close to the priests, religious and faithful of the particular Churches over which you preside.

I thank Bishop *Fernando Antônio Saburido*, President of the North East Region 2, for his cordial words on your behalf expressing again your affection and esteem and enabling me to share in your concerns and your pastoral plans. This is an excellent moment for me to remember Bishop Antônio Soares Costa, your Predecessor who headed this Region and, by the mysterious design of Providence, died six months ago. May God keep him in his glory! I ask the Lord who is full of mercy that in your diocese and throughout Brazil, faith, hope, charity and the *courageous witness of all Christians*, may continue to flourish, in conformity with the heritage received by the Church from the time of the Apostles.

2. In the first place, I would like to express my deep gratitude for the zeal with which you carry out the mission entrusted to you often in difficult circumstances guiding your flock. The Pastor often has to make weighty decisions, "*graviter onerata conscientia*", (gravely bound in conscience) on questions concerning a person, a community or an institution of his diocese. "God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the Gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I always mention you in

my prayers" (Rom 1,9). I fervently implore him to keep you firm in the faith and courageous in the hope that has been given to you, "for I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8,38-39).

I know the decisions of your assemblies and your endeavour to draw up various pastoral plans that give priority to the formation of the clergy and pastoral workers. Some of you have promoted evangelizing movements to make it easier to unify the faithful in a single line of action. In recent years I have appointed new pastors to the Dioceses of Floresta, Guarabira, Palmares, to mention but a few, thereby making it possible to continue the work of evangelization in those regions. The Successor of Peter always relies on you to base the formation you provide on the spirituality of communion and fidelity to the See of Peter, to ensure that the Holy Spirit does not act in vain. Indeed, the integrity of faith, together with ecclesiastical discipline, is and will always be a topic that requires attention and concern on the part of one and all, especially when it is a question of giving due importance to the fact that there is "one faith and one Baptism".

3. As you know, among the various documents that are concerned with Christian unity, there is the *Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism* published by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (ORE, 16 June 1993). Various sections of this document describe the "Formation of Those Involved in Pastoral Work" (nn. 70-86), the "Specialized Formation" of those involved in ecumenical work (nn. 87-90), and the "Permanent Formation" of ordained ministers and pastoral workers, with "a continuous *aggiornamento* ... in view of the continual evolution within the ecumenical movement" (n. 91).

These norms can give a sound orientation to theological study. The foundation, the centre, the final goal of faith is Christ; the mission of the Church is to announce him as our only Saviour. The action of the Church takes place above all through the ministry of priests. This is why, once again, I want to renew my appeal to make the duty of promoting priestly vocations your top pastoral priority. To help the large population of Catholic faithful, it is essential that they have priests who have been given a satisfactory formation to fit them for the essential duty of representing the Person of Christ to the local communities.

Moreover, the quality formation of pastoral workers who are the support of the evangelization promoted by the bishops and priests will prove helpful in fostering the life of the Church and the witness to the faith in difficult situations.

4. "That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that ... they also may be one in us" (Jn 17,21).

What was both an appeal and a prayer "reveals to us the unity of Christ with the Father as the

source of the Church's unity and as the gift which in him she will constantly receive until its mysterious fulfilment at the end of time" (*Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 48). These reflections made right after the beginning of the new millennium, remind us of *the importance of accepting and resolutely fostering the ecumenical spirit* with the other Churches and ecclesial communities.

On the threshold of the year 2000, I had the opportunity to launch "the Campaign of Fraternity", inviting dialogue with our brethren in the faith as co-responsible for the pastoral and saving mission of the Church. The coming closer together of all Christians on the ecumenical journey promoted by the Brazilian National Council of Christian Churches so that all people may believe in Christ, has helped create better understanding in the common quest to realize the unity that the Lord desired.

It is therefore a question of seeing that this unity become concrete in spirit and in life, not only in your regions, but in the whole country. There is no doubt that Brazil is still a predominantly Catholic nation, whose citizens must live with other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, with whom it is important to foster good relations to achieve a more effective evangelizing action.

5. The ecumenical perspective of theology urges assent to a faith that is contained and made explicit in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, and taught by the Magisterium of the Church. I know of the efforts your dioceses made to lay the foundations of a sound ecumenism. However, although it says in the *Directory for Ecumenism*: "diversity in the Church is a dimension of her catholicity" (n. 16), this must not lead to a certain *indifferentism* that equates all opinions in a false irenicism.

Ecumenical work must be based on the truth and come from upright and informed consciences. I express the hope that the efforts of Christian communities to achieve the longed for unity may always be founded on the truth "God has already revealed [to] the Church in her eschatological reality", so that "the elements of this already-given Church exist, found in their fullness in the Catholic Church and, without this fullness, in the other Communities" (*Ut unum sint*, n. 14).

Thus there is no incompatibility between the affirmation of an unconditional assent to the Truth of Jesus Christ, and respect for conscience. If religion is not just a question of conscience but also of *free* assent to the Truth which may or may not be accepted, one cannot compromise on its content.

It is required to explain it without omitting elements contained in the data of Revelation. Therefore you have the important duty to prepare masters of formation who can guarantee maximum fidelity in their theological teaching. Forming consciences, in full fidelity to the plan of salvation revealed by the Redeemer of humanity is the duty for which your Pastors and priests have the greatest responsibility.

Catechesis is certainly another field that deserves special attention, since schools, colleges, and

Catholic or non-Catholic universities form the cultural and educational basis of this great nation's people. Brazil has always been and will continue to be the cradle of the harmonious development of different schools of thought. Beside the typical attitude of acceptance and coexistence which can open the heart to people of different origins, in their inner hearts your people have always known how to foster the values of freedom and reciprocal respect as an inherent part of their culture and education. Is not this aspect important for formation in true ecumenism?

6. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I do not doubt then that you can render a great service to the cause of ecumenism when in catechesis for adults or for young persons you offer them a profound *education for freedom*, for "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (II Cor 3,17). When Christians live their faith to the full, they are attractive and inspire confidence and respect. They never impose their religious convictions, but know how to transmit the truth without betraying the trust placed in them. They accept people without ever accepting error. For this reason the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* can affirm: "By deviating from the moral law man violates his own freedom, becomes imprisoned within himself, disrupts neighbourly fellowship, and rebels against divine truth" (n. 1740).

May this spirit be reflected in the various pastoral programmes that you will consider starting after our meeting here in Rome! It is necessary to teach the true dignity of the person at work and at home, in rural life and in the city, and to be used to respecting and living with those who have different ideas, sowing peace in divided hearts and praying for everyone, so that God's grace can soften hearts that have perhaps been hardened by a bad example of behaviour.

7. To witness to the love that unites us, at the beginning of this century I proposed that we should "make the Church *the home and the school of communion*: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings" (*Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 43).

The Christian integrated into the Church and imbued with this spirit will know how to take every opportunity to share in her anxieties and her hopes: so that the joys and sorrows of the Church also be yours. Seek to encourage solidarity with Christians who are persecuted for their faith in many countries. At the same time, try to increase the volume of prayer, so that the Lord may hasten to bring about the longed-for unity of faith to which we all aspire.

Dear Brothers, I assure you once again of my deep communion in prayer, with the firm hope in the future of your dioceses in which a country is reflected that is still young and ready to face the new challenges at the beginning of this millennium. May the Lord grant you the joy of serving it, directing in his name the particular Churches entrusted to your care! May the Blessed Virgin and the holy patrons of every place accompany you and protect you always!

To you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, and to your diocesan faithful I cordially impart my

Apostolic Blessing.

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