



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL PROVINCES
OF LOUISVILLE, MOBILE AND NEW ORLEANS (U.S.A.)
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 4 December 2004

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. On the occasion of your quinquennial *ad Limina* visit, I extend a warm welcome to you, the Bishops of *the ecclesiastical Provinces of Louisville, Mobile and New Orleans*. As we continue our reflections on the ministry of governance entrusted to the successors of the Apostles, I would like today to consider some specific aspects of your relationship with *the lay faithful*.

I wish first of all to express my profound appreciation for the outstanding contribution which the laity have made, and continue to make, to the growth and expansion of the Church in your country, a contribution which I have personally witnessed and admired during my visits to the United States. I am convinced that, because "the renewal of the Church in America will not be possible without the active presence of the laity" (*Ecclesia in America*, 44), an essential part of your pastoral governance must be guiding and supporting them in their efforts to be a leaven of the Gospel in the world.

2. As the Second Vatican Council clearly stated, the exercise of the episcopal *munus regendi* by its very nature requires a recognition of *the contribution and charisms of the lay faithful* and their proper role *in building up the Church's unity* and carrying forward her mission in the world (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 30-31). Each Bishop is called to acknowledge the "essential and irreplaceable role" of the laity in the Church's mission (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 7) and to enable them to carry out their proper apostolate, "guided by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church, and impelled by Christian charity" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 7).

In your ministry of governance, you should consider it *a clear pastoral priority* to assist the lay faithful in understanding and embracing the *munus regale* which they have received by their baptismal incorporation into Christ. As the Church's tradition affirms, this kingly office is expressed

first in that "royal freedom" which enables the faithful to overcome the reign of sin in their own lives and, "by serving Christ in others..., to guide them to that King whom to serve is to reign" (*Lumen Gentium*, 36). The *lay faithful*, however, exercise this kingly office in *a specific way* through their efforts to extend the Kingdom of God *in and through their secular activity*, so that "the world will be imbued with the Spirit of Christ and more effectively attain its purpose in justice, in love and in peace" (*ibid.*).

3. It follows that lay men and women must be encouraged, through sound catechesis and continuing formation, to recognize the distinctive dignity and mission which they have received in Baptism and to embody in all their daily activities *an integrated approach to life* which finds its inspiration and strength from the Gospel (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 34). This means that the laity must be trained to distinguish clearly between their rights and duties as members of the Church and those which they have as members of human society, and encouraged to combine the two harmoniously, recognizing that "in every temporal affair they are to be *guided by their Christian conscience*, since *there is no human activity – even of the temporal order – that can be withdrawn from God's dominion*" (*Lumen Gentium*, 36).

A clear and authoritative reaffirmation of these fundamental principles of the lay apostolate will help to overcome the serious pastoral problems created by a growing failure to understand the Church's binding obligation to remind the faithful of their *duty in conscience* to act in accordance with her authoritative teaching. There is urgent need for *a comprehensive catechesis on the lay apostolate* which will necessarily highlight the importance of a *properly formed conscience*, the intrinsic relationship between freedom and moral truth, and the grave duty incumbent upon each Christian to work to renew and perfect the temporal order in accordance with the values of God's Kingdom. While fully respecting the legitimate separation of Church and State in American life, such a catechesis must also make clear that for the faithful Christian there can be no separation between the faith which is to be believed and put into practice (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25) and a commitment to full and responsible participation in professional, political and cultural life.

Given the importance of these issues for the life and mission of the Church in your country, I would encourage you to consider the inculcation of the doctrinal and moral principles underlying the lay apostolate as *essential to your ministry* as teachers and shepherds of the Church in America. I also invite you to discern, in consultation with members of the laity outstanding for their fidelity, knowledge and prudence, the most effective ways of promoting catechesis and clear-sighted reflection on this important area of the Church's social teaching.

4. An appreciation of the distinct gifts and apostolate of the laity will naturally lead to a strengthened commitment to fostering among the laity *a sense of shared responsibility* for the life and mission of the Church. In stressing the need for a theology and spirituality of communion and mission for the renewal of ecclesial life, I have pointed to the importance of "making our own the ancient pastoral wisdom which, without prejudice to their authority, encouraged Pastors to listen

more widely to the People of God" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 45). Certainly this will involve a conscious effort on the part of each Bishop to develop, within his particular Church, *structures of communion and participation* which make it possible, without prejudice to his personal responsibility for decisions he is called to make by virtue of his apostolic authority, "to listen to the Spirit who lives and speaks in the faithful" (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 44). More importantly, it calls for the cultivation, in every aspect of ecclesial life, of a *spirit of communion* grounded in the supernatural *sensus fidei* and the rich variety of charisms and missions which the Holy Spirit pours out upon the whole body of the baptized in order to build them up in unity and fidelity to the word of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 12). An understanding of cooperation and shared responsibility which is firmly rooted in the principles of a sound ecclesiology will ensure a genuine and fruitful collaboration between the Church's Pastors and the lay faithful, without the danger of distorting this relationship by the uncritical importation of categories and structures drawn from secular life.

5. Dear Brothers, in a spirit of gratitude and profound appreciation, let us commend to the Lord all the lay faithful of your particular Churches – the *young people* who are the hope of the future and even now are called to be a ferment of life and renewal in the Church and in American society, the *married couples* who strive to mirror in themselves and in their families the mystery of Christ's love for the Church, and the countless *men and women* who strive each day to bring the light of the Gospel to their homes, their workplaces and to the whole life of society. May they be ever more credible witnesses of the faith which has reconciled us to God (cf. *Rom* 5:1), the love which will transfigure the world, and the hope which looks forward to "new heavens and a new earth, where, according to his promise, the justice of God will reside" (*2 Pet* 3:13).

With these sentiments and with fraternal affection, I invoke upon you and upon the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care the loving protection of Mary, Mother of the Church. To all I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and peace in the Lord.