



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF MINNESOTA,
NORTH DAKOTA AND SOUTH DAKOTA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 10 December 2004

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. In this, the last of my meetings with the Pastors of the Church in the United States making their quinquennial visits *ad limina Apostolorum*, I offer a warm greeting to you, *the Bishops of Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota*.

In the course of this year, I have engaged with you and your fellow Bishops in a series of reflections on the *threefold office of teaching, sanctifying and governing* entrusted to the successors of the Apostles. Through a consideration of the spiritual gifts and the apostolic mission received at episcopal ordination, whereby each Bishop is sacramentally configured to Jesus Christ, the Head and chief Shepherd of his Church (cf. *1 Pet 5:4*), we have sought to deepen our appreciation of *the mystery of the Church*, the mystical Body of Christ, enlivened by the Holy Spirit and constantly built up in unity through a rich diversity of gifts, ministries and works (cf. *1 Cor 12:4-6*; *Lumen Gentium*, 7).

2. In these past eight months, I have been blessed with an opportunity to meet with each of the American Bishops, and, through them, to hear *the living voice of the Church throughout the United States*. This has been a source of great consolation for me, and an invitation to give thanks to the Triune God for the rich harvest which his grace continues to bring forth in your local Churches. At the same time, I have shared the deep pain which you and your people have experienced in these last years, and I have witnessed your determination to deal fairly and forthrightly with the serious pastoral issues which have been raised as a result. In fulfillment of my ministry as the Successor of Peter, I have wished to confirm each and every one of you in the faith (cf. *Lk 22:32*) and to

encourage you in your efforts to be "vigilant sentinels, courageous prophets, credible witnesses and faithful servants of Christ" for the People of God entrusted to your care (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 3).

From the beginning of our meetings, I have stressed that your duty of building up the Church in communion and mission must necessarily begin with your own *spiritual renewal*, and I have encouraged you to be the first to indicate, by your own witness of conversion to the word of God and obedience to the apostolic Tradition, the royal way that leads the pilgrim Church to Christ and the fullness of his Kingdom. In particular, I have called you to adopt a lifestyle marked by that *evangelical poverty* which represents "an indispensable condition for a fruitful episcopal ministry" (*Pastores Gregis*, 20). As the Council itself stated, the Lord himself carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, and his Church is called to follow along this same path (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8).

3. Now, at the conclusion of this series of meetings, I leave *two charges* to you and your Brother Bishops. The first is a fraternal encouragement to *persevere joyfully in the ministry entrusted to you*, in obedience to the authentic teaching of the Church. Can we not see in the pain and scandal of recent years both a "sign of the times" (cf. *Mt 16:3*) and a providential call to conversion and deeper fidelity to the demands of the Gospel? In the life of each believer and the life of the whole Church, a sincere examination of conscience and the recognition of failure is always accompanied by renewed confidence in the healing power of God's grace and a summons to press on to what lies ahead (*Phil 3:13*). In her own way, the Church in the United States has been called to begin the new millennium by "starting afresh from Christ" (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29) and by *making the truth of the Gospel clearly the measure of her life and all her activity*.

In this light, I once more praise your efforts to ensure that each individual and group in the Church understands the urgent need for *a consistent, honest and faithful witness to the Catholic faith*, and that each of the Church's institutions and apostolates expresses in every aspect of its life *a clear Catholic identity*. This is perhaps the most difficult and delicate challenge which you face in your role as teachers and shepherds of the Church in America today, yet it is one which *cannot be renounced*. In fulfilling your duty to "teach, exhort and correct with all authority" (cf. *Tit 2:15*), you are first called to be "*united in mind and judgment*" (*1 Cor 1:10*), working harmoniously in the proclamation of the Gospel.

4. The *second charge* is a heartfelt appeal to keep your gaze fixed on the great goal set before the whole Church at the dawn of this third Christian millennium: *the proclamation of Jesus Christ* as the Redeemer of humanity. If the events of the past few years have necessarily focused your attention on the interior life of the Church, this should in no way distract you from lifting your eyes to the great task of the new evangelization and the need for "a new apostolic outreach" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 40). *Duc in altum!* "The Church in America must speak increasingly of Jesus Christ, the human face of God and the divine face of man" (*Ecclesia in America*, 67), devoting the

best of her efforts to a more compelling proclamation of the Gospel, the growth of holiness, and the more effective transmission of the treasure of the faith to the younger generation.

Since a clear sense of mission will naturally bear fruit in unity of purpose among all the members of the Christian community (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 32), such a missionary outreach will surely promote the work of *reconciliation and renewal* within your local Churches. It will also consolidate and advance the Church's *prophetic witness* in contemporary American society. The Church feels responsible for every human being and for the future of society (cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, 15), and this responsibility falls in a particular way to *the lay faithful*, whose vocation is to be a leaven of the Gospel in the world. As we look to the challenges lying before the Church in the United States today, *two urgent tasks* immediately present themselves: the need for an evangelization of culture in general, which, as I have stated, is a unique contribution which the Church in your country can make to the mission *ad gentes* today, and the need for Catholics to cooperate fruitfully with men and women of good will in building a culture of respect for life (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 95).

5. Dear Brothers, I give thanks to God for the many blessings bestowed during this series of meetings of the Successor of Peter with the American Bishops. Having come to the heart of the Church and been confirmed in *communion* with the Chair of unity, may you now return to your local Churches with renewed enthusiasm for your *mission* of teaching, sanctifying and governing the flocks entrusted to your care. As you bear "the burden of the day and the heat" (cf. *Mt* 20:12) in the service of the Gospel, may you always be reassured by the knowledge that, at every step of her earthly journey, "the Church draws strength from the power of her Risen Lord to overcome, in patience and in charity, her sorrows and her difficulties, both those from within and those from without, so that she may reveal in the world, faithfully albeit amid shadows, the mystery of her Lord, until in the end it shall be manifested in the fullness of light" (*Lumen Gentium*, 8).

Our meetings have fittingly come to an end during the week in which the Church celebrates the sesquicentenary of the definition of the *dogma of the Immaculate Conception* of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Patroness of the Church in the United States. As we lift up the fruits of these visits to the Lord and implore his blessings upon the Catholic community in America, let us turn our eyes to Our Lady, who, in the words of the Council, remains "the pre-eminent and wholly unique member of the Church, and its outstanding model in faith and love" (*Lumen Gentium*, 13). May Mary Immaculate guide each of you, together with all the clergy, religious and lay faithful of your local Churches, along your pilgrim way to the fullness of the Kingdom, and lift your eyes to the glorious vision of a creation redeemed and transformed by grace. May she, the Mother of the Church, assist her children, "who have fallen yet strive to rise again," to rejoice in the great things which the Lord has already accomplished (cf. *Lk* 1:49) and to be faithful witnesses before the world of the hope which will never leave us disappointed (cf. *Rom* 5:5).

To all of you, with great affection in the Lord, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana