



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL PROVINCES
OF BORDEAUX AND POITIERS (FRANCE)
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT** Friday, 13 February 2004

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. At the end of your *ad limina* visit, I welcome you with joy, Pastors of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Bordeaux and Poitiers. In coming on pilgrimage in the footsteps of the Apostles Peter and Paul, you have entrusted the faithful of your Dioceses to them, asking for their intercession to support your mission to teach, govern and sanctify the people in your charge. I thank Archbishop Jean-Pierre Ricard of Bordeaux, President of the Bishops' Conference of France, for presenting to me the hopes of your diocesan Churches. I hope that your stay in Rome will strengthen you in your ministry and help to imbue the missionary outreach of your communities with fresh zeal. You have just mentioned the attention that the Bishops of France pay to *the youth apostolate*. Indeed, the Bishop is asked to be "particularly concerned for the evangelization and spiritual accompaniment of young people. A minister of hope can hardly fail to build the future together with those to whom the future is entrusted, that is, with young people" (*Pastores Gregis*, n. 53).

2. In your quinquennial reports, you recall the complex, difficult environment in which young people live. The *new information technology* influences their cultural universe and has a strong impact on their relationship with the world, with time and with others, and shapes their behaviour. This creates a culture of the immediate and the transitory that does not always favour a deeper approach, interior growth or moral discernment. Yet the use of these new means of communication is of undeniable interest. Moreover, your Conference and many Dioceses have identified clearly the positive aspects of this change, suggesting especially to young people those Internet sites on which they can find information and learn and discover the different proposals of the Church. I cannot but encourage the development of these means to serve the Gospel and to foster dialogue and communication.

Society is marked by numerous inconsistencies that render young people particularly fragile:

broken families, families reconstituted with different siblings, a rupture in social relations. How can we fail to think of those children and young people who suffer deeply from the break-up of their nuclear family or who are in unstable situations that often make them feel as if society rejects them? Likewise, the evolution of attitudes continues to be a cause of worry: an exacerbated subjectivity; an excessive distancing from customs that give young people the idea that any form of conduct is right because it is possible; a serious deterioration of moral awareness that leads to the conviction that objective good and evil no longer exist. You also mention social violence that gives rise to serious tensions, especially in certain urban or suburban neighbourhoods, as well as the increase in suicidal tendencies and the use of drugs. Lastly, the growth of unemployment worries young people.

They sometimes give the impression that they have entered adult life too soon because of their knowledge and behaviour and of not having had the time for physical, intellectual, emotional and moral development, the stages of which are not concomitant. The multiplicity of messages and models of life conveyed by society easily confuses young people's perception and practice of moral and spiritual values, to the point of jeopardizing a well-knit identity, control of their emotions and the development of their personality. These are the many phenomena that endanger the growth of young people and the friendly co-existence between individuals and generations.

3. As Pastors, you must be *abreast of these situations*, aware of the *generosity of young people* who readily offer to work for just causes and who are eager to find happiness. These qualities are a pastoral potential that the Church must take into account in her *youth programmes*, and it is the Church's vocation to contribute to the full development of the young. French Christian communities are the heir to great figures in the world of education: priests, men and women religious and lay people who succeeded in introducing appropriate teaching methods in their time. I ask you, despite your scant means, to spare no effort in the field of education. In particular, I appeal to the religious communities with this charism not to desert the world of school or extracurricular education, as it is the place par excellence to attract young people, proclaiming the Gospel to them to prepare the future of the Church. I invite *youth movements*, although they are few, to persevere with their activity, never forgetting that all education is long term. Today I ask them to make novel suggestions for young people, to offer them the specific places, means and guidance within their Diocese and parish, their chaplaincies, movements or services, that will foster their human and spiritual growth. It is up to Christian communities to lead young people to Christ and friendship with him, so that they may live of his life and build an ever more fraternal society. The social aspect must not lead one to forget the goal of pastoral care: to lead young people to Christ.

4. Young people tend to form groups where they are recognized and loved. No child can live or be formed without love and the kindly watchfulness of adults; this is actually the mission of education. I therefore ask diocesan communities to pay *ever greater attention to the places of education*; first of all, the family, which it is right to support and help, especially in parent-child relationships and particularly during adolescence. The presence of adults other than parents is often beneficial.

Likewise, school is a privileged place for a fraternal and peaceful life where each person is accepted for who he is, with respect for his values and personal and family beliefs. I encourage *Catholic schools* to be communities where Christian values are part of the educational programme and training, where the teaching of the Magisterium is passed on to young people through catechesis adapted to their various age-groups at school. The presence of non-Catholic children must not be an obstacle to this process. I also hail the mission of the *school and university chaplaincies*. Even if their members are few, may those who guide them always remember that in one way or another young people pass on what they learn to their peers! It is important to plan the pastoral care of young people both at important times - spending time with them is of capital importance in the education of youth - and in the context of regular activities, so that the religious outlook is part of their development and of their life.

Your reports and diocesan bulletins demonstrate that the *World Youth Day* in Paris, which I remember with emotion, is still continuing to bear fruit among the young. It is important to remind them to live their relationship with Christ faithfully, and to realize that the life of faith and sacramental practice has nothing to do with purely transitory wishes and is not merely one activity among the many in life. I hope that teachers will help them to discern their priorities, for it is impossible to truly know Christ without making an effort to meet him and have regular encounters with him. We should also rely heavily on young people to evangelize other young people, to attract their friends. In these contexts they have resources which it is right to use well.

5. The pastoral care of young people demands perseverance, attention and creativity on the part of those who accompany them. Do not hesitate to designate for this *highly-qualified priests* who have a *sound formation and a solid spiritual and moral life* in order to guide young people, pass Christian teaching on to them and share with them times of brotherhood and leisure activities so that they may become missionaries. I hope that your Dioceses will do their best to achieve this despite the difficult period through which you are going. May adults provide young people with the concrete means to meet one another in order to live and deepen their faith, training them to study and meditate on the Word of God and have recourse to personal prayer, while also calling them to conform themselves ever more closely to Christ. It is also right to help them question their life and their plan for life so that they make themselves available to the Lord's call to a special vocation in the Church: the priesthood, the diaconate or the consecrated life. Parents and educators should not be afraid to ask young people whether they might have a vocation to the priestly or religious life.

This is in no way an obstacle to freedom of choice but on the contrary, it is an invitation to reflect on their future "to make their life an "I love you", as I recalled during my Visit to Lyons in 1986. It is the task of all who work in youth ministry to help them have a faith that allows them to measure themselves critically against contemporary culture by developing a healthy discernment of questions that concern society.

You recall with concern the fractures in the world of youth and the precarious situations that confront them and are sometimes an incentive for self-assertion, violence or destructive conduct.

Following in Christ's footsteps, the Church seeks to be close to young people injured by life for whom the Lord has a special love. I greet and encourage the work of the people in the movements, services and the world of charity who encourage creativity in charity, making themselves close to the alienated and the suffering, enabling them to recover a taste for life. May they reveal the face of Christ, who loves every human being, whatever his direction or frailties!

6. I would also like to draw your attention to the support you should give to *young people preparing for marriage*. They have frequently known much suffering in their families and sometimes have repeated experiences of it. Society abounds with various types of relationships, devoid of anthropological or moral qualifications. For her part, the Church wishes to propose the path of progress in a loving relationship that passes through the engagement period and proposes the ideal of chastity; she recalls that marriage between a man and a woman as well as the family are founded first of all on a strong relationship and a definitive commitment, and not only on the purely emotional aspect which cannot constitute the sole basis of married life. Pastors and Christian couples should not be afraid to help young people reflect on these sensitive and essential matters through catecheses and lively, appropriate dialogue, making the depth and beauty of human love shine forth!

7. The Church has an *original word to add in the discussions on education*, on the social phenomena and especially on issues concerning the emotions and the moral and spiritual values. Formation cannot consist only in technical and scientific training; it aims principally at an education of the whole being. I greet the priests, deacons, men and women religious and lay people who have this noble desire to guide young people. I know that their task is arduous and at times unproductive since the results do not always seem to measure up to the effort expended; may they not be disheartened, for no one knows the secret of young hearts! "If Christ is presented to young people as he really is, they experience him as an answer that is convincing and they can accept his message, even when it is demanding" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 9).

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, at the end of our meeting I give thanks with you for the work of the Spirit in the hearts of young people. They ask the Church to accompany them; they deeply aspire to live a demanding and true ideal despite the often confused points of reference the contemporary world offers them. It is up to you to lead them to Christ and to point out the path of holiness so that they can play an ever more active part in the life of the Church and society. I encourage the Christian communities of your Dioceses to give them their proper place, to listen to the questions they ask and to give them truthful answers. Through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Lourdes, whose feast we have just celebrated, I willingly grant an affectionate Apostolic Blessing to you and all the members of your diocesan communities, especially the young people to whom I ask you to convey this message: the Pope is counting on them.

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