



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

Meeting with Polish Bishops' Conference

Friday, 11 June 1999, Warsaw

My Venerable Brother Bishops,

1. In a spirit of thanksgiving for the gift of another pilgrimage to my homeland, I greet you most cordially, Pastors of the Church in Poland. I salute you all, the Cardinal Primate as President of the Conference, the Cardinals, the Archbishops and Bishops. Please accept, as an expression of fraternal love, a special word of solidarity and enduring closeness to the Church in Poland.

This present pilgrimage, the longest of all that I have made so far, comes on the eve of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, in the year dedicated to God the Father. The grace of faith and the light of the Holy Spirit who lives in the Church enable us to see the full salvific dimension of the events and the great anniversaries to which this pilgrimage is linked. As sons of the one "Father who is in heaven" (*Mt 5:45*), we experience once again his love in shared celebration. This love, revealed in Christ, is the very heart of the Christian life: "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (*Jn 17:3*).

Among the various historical events and anniversaries, viewed in the context of God's saving plan which includes our own time, we celebrate the millennium of the canonization of Saint Adalbert, the Jubilee of the millennium of the establishment of Church structures in Poland, with the first Metropolitan See and the Archdiocese of Gniezno — with the suffragan Dioceses of Krakow, Wroclaw and Kolobrzeg — and the Bicentenary of the erection of the Diocese of Warsaw. We will also conclude the Second Plenary Synod.

2. I give thanks to God for the twenty years of my service to the holy Church in the See of Peter,

and also because in that time I have been able to serve the Church in my homeland in a special way. This moment of historic change calls us to look with Christian hope towards the future, towards the third millennium which is now so near.

This present visit is in a sense the crowning of all my previous pilgrimages to Poland. This is also highlighted by the theme of the pilgrimage: "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). Love is in fact "the fulfilling of the Law" (Rom 13:10). "Charity, in its twofold reality as love of God and neighbour, is the summing up of the moral life of the believer. It has in God its source and its goal" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 50).

3. The Gospel of the Eight Beatitudes contained in the Sermon on the Mount accompanies this pilgrimage in a certain way and directs our thoughts to Christ. His life is the fulfilment of all the Beatitudes and shows forth a vision of Christianity which is valid for all time. Formed in this spirit, those who follow and proclaim Christ will be for every generation living witnesses to his saving presence and will lead others to God who is love. The Church, as a "universal sacrament of salvation" (*Lumen Gentium*, 48), must become day by day a sign of Christ living through the ages, a more comprehensible and transparent sign that wants "all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tm 2:4). The indispensable condition for this, that is, for the realization of the Church's saving mission, is love. Upon love the Church is founded, and upon love the Church grows and develops, "that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them just as you have loved me" (Jn 17:23). The essence of the apostolate of all members of the Church is the spreading of the truth about God's love. Do all that you can to see that this truth is proclaimed, accepted and realized in the life of Pastors and all believers.

The Sermon on the Mount is the programme for the whole Church. The community of the New Covenant is formed when it is based upon the law of love written in every human heart (cf. *Jer* 31:31-33; *Heb* 10:16-17). The Gospel Beatitudes are in a sense the concrete form of this law, and at the same time they ensure a true and lasting happiness which springs from purity and peace of heart, the fruits of reconciliation with God and men.

4. The ranks of the Saints and Blessed are an eloquent sign of the fulfilment of the promise of the Beatitudes. Included in these ranks are those who will be raised to the glory of the altars during this pilgrimage: Blessed Kinga, who will be canonized at Stary Sacz, Blessed Wincenty Frelichowski, raised to the honours of the altars a few days ago at Torun, then the Servant of God Regina Protmann, together with the Servant of God Edmund Bojanowski and the one hundred and eight martyrs who during the inhuman occupation bore heroic witness to the faith and whom the Church will proclaim Blessed in Warsaw in a few days' time. For the Church in Poland, together with the host of sons and daughters of this land, they are a sign and an encouragement which reminds us how the grace of holiness can flourish in every situation and in every circumstance of life, even in the midst of persecution, oppression and injustice. Among these heroes of the faith

there are Bishops and priests who, imitating Christ the Good Shepherd, did not hesitate to “lay down their lives for their sheep” (cf. *Jn* 10:11).

Dear Brothers, fix your eyes on the shining examples of their lives, so that love of God and man may grow stronger in your hearts and in the hearts of all those whom you serve as Pastors. An indispensable condition for fruitful pastoral care is a personal relationship with Christ, which shows itself primarily in prayer and in love filled with a spirit of sacrifice for the Church, our Mother. “Zeal for your house has consumed me, and the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me” (*Ps* 69:9).

5. At the source of all renewal there is the word of God, “which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (*Acts* 20:32). And as relevant as ever is the Second Vatican Council’s exhortation that “the preaching of the Church, as indeed the entire Christian religion, should be nourished and ruled by Sacred Scripture. In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them” (*Dei Verbum*, 21). Bishops above all must be open to the light and power of the word of God, lest – as Saint Augustine warns – he who is entrusted with the holy ministry of the word, but not hearing the word within, becomes a mere display of empty preaching of the word of God (cf. *Sermon* 179, I: *PL* 38, 966). “The word of God is alive and active” (*Heb* 4:12). May it nourish your spirituality and become a source of fruitful apostolic work, in keeping with Saint Thomas’ principle: *contemplata aliis tradere*. The word of God is the irreplaceable means of salvation for people in every age; it contains such “force and power that it can serve the Church as her support and vigour, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life” (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

6. The greatest pastoral duty of each of you is to care for the unerring transmission of the deposit of faith. In our own days, the universal Church has been given a precious instrument to help achieve this: the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It is an eloquent sign of the unity of the Church’s teaching. In the Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum* I wrote: “This catechism is not intended to replace the local catechisms duly approved by the ecclesiastical authorities, the diocesan Bishops and the Episcopal Conferences, especially if they have been approved by the Holy See. It is meant to encourage and assist in the writing of new local catechisms, which take into account various situations and cultures, while carefully preserving the unity of faith and fidelity to Catholic doctrine” (No. 4). The application of this by the Pastors of the Church in Poland is one of the most urgent needs of the present time. A systematic and comprehensive catechesis, including the catechesis of adults, is essential for the deepening and strengthening of faith in people’s hearts, a faith which has its influence on the way they live and act.

7. The Second Plenary Synod has been a very important event for the Church in Poland. The Synod documents cover all the most important areas of the Church’s life: the universal call to holiness, the work of the new evangelization, liturgy and worship, the place and mission of lay

Catholics in social, economic and political life, the presence of Gospel inspiration in culture, the renewal and strengthening of the family, education and formation for the priesthood and religious life. The communities of local Churches which you head now face a most important and surely most difficult task. I am thinking of the completion and fulfilment of all that has been written in the Synod, in the form of well-thought out directives, as a programme now ready to be put into action. I hope and pray that the Synod becomes a source of inspiration and renewal of Christian life in the spirit of the Gospel.

8. Concerning entry into the European Union, a very important question is the creative contribution of believers to modern culture. I repeat once again what I said to the Polish Bishops during their last *Ad Limina* visit early in 1998: “Europe needs a Poland which believes deeply and is culturally creative in a Christian way, conscious of the role which Providence has entrusted to it. Poland can and must offer a service to Europe which is in general terms identical with the task of rebuilding at home a spiritual communion based upon faithfulness to the Gospel. Our nation . . . has much to offer Europe, above all Poland’s Christian tradition and its rich religious experience today” (14 February 1998).

On the threshold of the third millennium, the Church in Poland faces new historic challenges. Poland enters the twenty-first century as a free and sovereign country. This freedom, if it is not to be abused, requires people aware not only of their rights but also of their duties; generous people motivated by love of the homeland and a spirit of service, who in a bond of fraternity want to build the common good and contribute to a properly ordered freedom in every aspect of personal, family and social life. As I have stressed on a number of occasions, freedom demands constant reference to the truth of the Gospel and to stable and well established moral norms which enable people to distinguish between good and evil. This is especially important in our own day, when Poland is going through a time of reform.

I am glad that lay people are committing themselves ever more fully to the life of the Church and society. An expression of this are the many Catholic associations and organizations, particularly Catholic Action, and the participation of believers in public, economic and political life. It is my hope that the Pastors will support the lay faithful, “so that, in a spirit of unity and through honest and impartial service, working together with everyone, they may be able to preserve and enhance Christian tradition and culture on the socio-political level” (Address to Polish Bishops on their visit *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, 16 January 1998). The social doctrine of the Church is bound to be a great help in this field, and it needs to be more widely proclaimed so that “the values and content of the Gospel may permeate the categories of human thought, the criteria of human evaluation and the norms of human behaviour” (Address to Polish Bishops on their visit *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, 14 February 1998).

9. In the spirit of the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, you must care in a special way for your brother priests and for seminarians, so that inspired by a spirit of zeal and charity they

may become priests after God's own heart. Through them, Christ the High Priest wishes to be present in the midst of his people "as one who serves" (Lk 22:27) and who "offers his life for his sheep" (cf. *Jn* 10:15). This recalls Saint Adalbert, Bishop and Martyr, in the millennium of his canonization. Through his pastoral service and the blood of his martyrdom, the Church in Poland experienced great growth almost one thousand years ago, with his first Metropolitan See in Gniezno of the Piast.

I take this occasion to draw your attention to the important area of priestly and religious vocations. There needs to be developed a pastoral strategy for vocations, and first of all there is a need to pray a great deal and encourage others to pray, so that there will be no lack of men and women ready to follow the voice of Christ.

With equal insistence holy Pastors are called for by those great witnesses to the faith who will be beatified in Warsaw: Antoni Julian Nowowiejski, Archbishop Leon Wetmanski, Bishop Goral, together with the already beatified Wincenty Frelichowski, and many priests, men and women religious and lay people. The witness of their heroic fidelity is a great moral gift and a great responsibility for those after them who have assumed the task of pastoral service.

The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 directs our minds and hearts in a special way towards the young people who in the new millennium will be the face of the Church and of our homeland. Trust placed in young people does not give rise to disappointment, for youth are particularly open to the truth of the Gospel. I have experienced this many times during my apostolic journeys. I thank most sincerely all those who devote their time and talents to passing on to the younger generation the great heritage of Polish culture, tradition and religiosity, who are involved in preparing young people for the beauty of love in marriage and in responsible parenthood. If young people are to fulfil the hope placed in them, they must be taught to draw strength from direct contact with God in the liturgy and the holy sacraments, in Sacred Scripture, from the life and apostolic work of the Church. Especially today, young people too need hope. Every opportunity should be taken to ensure that the family, the Church, the schools, local authorities and the State work together harmoniously to protect young people from the dangers which today's consumer culture brings with it.

To your special care I also commend the smallest but at the same time most important "community of life and love" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48): the family. Society and the nation crumble without healthy and strong families. But the stability and unity of the family are today seriously threatened. You must oppose this danger, working with all people of good will to form a climate favourable to the strengthening of the family. I am glad that in Poland too there are emerging pro-family movements which spread a new style of Christian behaviour and show that where there is true love and an atmosphere of faith there is also room for new life.

You are well aware of my concern and my efforts to defend life and the family. Wherever I am, I do

not cease to proclaim in Christ's name the fundamental right of every human being, the right to life. Continue to do all in your power to safeguard the dignity and the moral health of the family, so that it may be strong in God. May families know that the Church is close to them, respects them and supports them in their efforts to maintain their identity, stability and holiness. This I ask of you as Pastors in a special way.

10. Dear Brothers! All that I have just said demands a great mobilization and spiritual openness on the part of the whole Church, and particularly of her Pastors. Once again I make a fervent appeal to you: following Christ's own example, be "as one who serves", be "good shepherds who know their sheep and are known by them, like true fathers who are outstanding for their spirit of charity and zeal towards all people" (*Christus Dominus*, 16). It is my hope that, through your generous service filled with a spirit of self-sacrifice, the Church in Poland will care for "the least of the brethren" (cf. *Mt* 10:42), for the poor, for the sick, for those who have been wronged, for the suffering, for those without hope. May the Church here serve everyone with the vast array of saving gifts received from Christ for the good of all people. As the theme for the next Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops announces, the Bishop must be the servant of the Gospel of Christ, in order to bring hope to the world.

Jesus Christ has made you Pastors of the People of God at this historic time which straddles two millennia. Your apostolic work can produce fruit for the good of souls only because of his help and his light. "Without Christ we can do nothing" (cf. *Jn* 15:5), without him our human efforts are useless. I pray the Lord to grant abundant gifts to you and to the whole Church in Poland. In your shared task of preaching the Gospel, I entrust you to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Word Incarnate, the only Saviour of the world, and I bless you from my heart.

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! (Rev 7:12).