



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE BISHOPS OF EL SALVADOR
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Thursday, 28 February 2008

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

I receive you with great joy today when your *ad limina* visit has brought you to the tombs of the Apostles to strengthen the bonds of communion with the Apostolic See of your respective particular Churches. My joy is even greater because this is my first opportunity to meet you as the Successor of Peter. I thank Archbishop Fernando Sáenz Lacalle of San Salvador, President of your Bishops' Conference, for his thoughtful words on your behalf. Through you, I send a special greeting to your priests, Religious and lay faithful, who with generosity and tireless effort live and proclaim the Good News of redemption, the one, true hope for all people which Christ has brought to us.

The majority of the Salvadoran People is distinguished by lively faith and a strong religious sentiment. The Gospel, brought there by the first missionaries and preached fervently by Pastors full of love for God such as Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, has put down deep roots in this beautiful Land and has yielded abundant fruits of Christian life and holiness. Dear Brother Bishops, the transforming capacity of the message of salvation has once again become reality: the Church is required to proclaim it because "the Word of God is not fettered" (II Tim 2: 9) and is living and active (cf. Heb 4: 12).

As Pastors of the Church, your hearts are moved to consider the serious needs of the people entrusted to your care, whom you wish to serve with love and dedication. Their plight of poverty obliges many of them to emigrate in search of a better standard of living. Emigration often has negative consequences for the stability of marriage and the family. I also know of the efforts you are making to foster reconciliation and peace in your Country and thus to overcome painful past events.

At the same time, you addressed a Pastoral Letter in 2005 to the issue of violence, considered the most serious problem in your Nation. In analyzing its causes, you recognize that increased violence is an immediate consequence of other, deeper social scourges such as poverty, lack of education, the gradual erosion of those values that have always tempered the Salvadoran soul, and the break-up of families. Indeed, the family is an indispensable good for the Church and society as well as a fundamental element for building peace (cf. *Message for the World Day of Peace 2008*, n. 3). For this reason, you feel the need to revitalize and strengthen in all your dioceses adequate and effective pastoral care, which offers young people a solid spiritual and emotional formation that will help them discover the beauty of God's plan for human love and enable them to live consistently the authentic values of marriage and the family, such as mutual tenderness and respect, self-control, the total gift of self and constant fidelity.

In the face of widespread poverty, people are feeling the critical need to improve the structures and financial conditions that will enable everyone to lead a dignified life. It should not be forgotten, however, that man is not a mere product of the material or social conditions in which he lives. He needs something more; he aspires to more than science or any human initiative can possibly give him. There is within him an immense thirst for God. Yes, dear Brother Bishops, men and women are yearning for God in the depths of their hearts and he is the only One who can satisfy their thirst for fullness and life, because he alone can give us the certainty of unconditional love, of a love stronger than death (cf. *Spe Salvi*, n. 26). "Man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope" (*ibid.*, n. 23).

It is therefore necessary to encourage in your diocesan communities an ambitious and daring evangelization effort directed to facilitating this intimate encounter with the living Christ, which is at the origin and heart of Christian existence (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 1). Pastoral care must thus be centred on "Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 29). It is necessary to help the faithful to increasingly discover the spiritual riches of their Baptism, through which they are "called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 40). These spiritual riches will also illuminate their commitment to bear witness to Christ at the heart of human society (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 43). To fulfil this most exalted vocation they must be firmly rooted in an intense life of prayer, must listen assiduously and humbly to the Word of God and participate frequently in the sacraments, so that they acquire a strong sense of belonging to the Church and a sound doctrinal formation, especially with regard to the Church's social doctrine in which they will find clear criteria and guidelines for giving a Christian light to the society in which they live.

Priests must have a special place in your pastoral concern. You are very closely bound to them by virtue of the Sacrament of Orders which they have received and by their participation in the same evangelizing mission. They deserve your best efforts and your closeness to each one of them, with knowledge of their personal situations, attention to all their spiritual and material needs and

encouragement to persevere on their path of priestly holiness. In this, imitate the example of Jesus, who considered all who were with him his friends (cf. Jn 15: 15). As the foundation and visible principle of unity in your particular Churches (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 23), I encourage you to be promoters and models of communion in your own presbyterate and to recommend that all your priests live in harmony and union with one another and with their Bishop, as an expression of your affection as father and brother and without failing to correct irregular situations when necessary.

The priest's love for and fidelity to his vocation will be the best and most effective form of vocations promotion, as well as an example and incentive for your seminarians who are the heart of your dioceses. It is on them that you must expend your best resources and energies (cf. *Optatam Totius*, n. 5), for they are the hope of your Churches.

Also follow with attention the life and work of religious Institutes, esteeming and promoting in your diocesan communities the specific vocation and mission of the consecrated life (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 44), and encouraging them to collaborate in diocesan pastoral activity in order to enrich "ecclesial communion by their presence and ministry" (*Pastores Gregis*, n. 50).

Although the challenges you face are enormous and seem to exceed your strength and capacity, know that you can turn with trust to the Lord, for whom nothing is impossible (cf. Lk 1: 37), and open your hearts to the impulse of divine grace. In this constant, prayerful contact with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, your best pastoral projects will mature for your communities and you will truly be ministers of hope for all your brethren (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, n. 3), since Jesus is the One who brings to fruition your pastoral ministry, which in turn must be an authentic reflection of your pastoral charity in the image of the One who came "not to be served... and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10: 45).

Dear Brothers, at the end of our meeting, I thank you once again for your generous devotion to the Church and accompany you with my prayers so that in all your pastoral challenges the Lord Jesus' words may fill you with hope and courage: "And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28: 20). I clasp you to my heart in an embrace of peace in which I include the priests, men and women religious and lay people of your local Churches. Upon each one of you and your diocesan faithful I implore the constant protection of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Peace and Patroness of El Salvador, and at the same time I impart the Apostolic Blessing to you with deep affection.