



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO BRAZIL ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIFTH GENERAL CONFERENCE
OF THE BISHOPS OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

**MEETING AND CELEBRATION OF VESPERS
WITH THE BISHOPS OF BRAZIL**

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Catedral da Sé, São Paulo

Friday, 11 May 2007

Dear Brother Bishops!

"Although he was the Son of God, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." (cf. Heb 5:8-9).

1. The text we have just heard in the Lesson for Vespers contains a profound teaching. Once again we realize that God's word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword; it penetrates to the depths of the soul and it grants solace and inspiration to his faithful servants (cf. *Heb 4:12*).

I thank God for the opportunity to be with this distinguished Episcopate, which presides over one of the largest Catholic populations in the world. I greet you with a sense of deep communion and sincere affection, well aware of your devotion to the communities entrusted to your care. The warm reception given to me by the Rector of the *Catedral da Sé* and by all present has made me feel at home in this great common House which is our Holy Mother, the Catholic Church.

I extend a special greeting to the new Officers of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops and, with gratitude for the kind words of its President, Archbishop Geraldo Lyrio Rocha, I offer prayerful good wishes for his work in deepening communion among the Bishops and in promoting common pastoral activity in a territory of continental dimensions.

2. With its traditional hospitality, Brazil is hosting the participants in the Fifth Conference of Latin American Bishops. I express my gratitude for the kind welcome given to its members, and my deep appreciation for the prayers of the Brazilian people, particularly their prayers for the success of the Bishops' meeting in Aparecida.

This meeting is a great ecclesial event and part of the missionary outreach which Latin America needs to undertake, beginning here—on Brazilian soil. That is why I wished to speak first to you, the Bishops of Brazil, evoking these words, so rich in content, from the Letter to the Hebrews: *Although he was Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb 5:8-9)*. Filled with meaning, these verses speak of God's compassion for us, as expressed in the passion of his Son. They speak of Christ's obedience and his free, conscious acceptance of the Father's plan, which appears most clearly in his prayer on the Mount of Olives: "Not my will, but yours, be done" (*Lk 22:42*). Jesus himself teaches us that the true way of salvation lies in conforming our will to the will of God. This is what we pray for in the third petition of the "Our Father": that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, since wherever God's will reigns, there the Kingdom of God is present. Jesus attracts us by his will, his filial will, and so he leads us to salvation. By freely accepting the will of God, in union with Jesus Christ, we open the world to God's Kingdom.

We Bishops have come together to manifest this central truth, since we are directly bound to Christ, the Good Shepherd. The mission entrusted to us as teachers of the faith consists in recalling, in the words of the Apostle of the Gentiles, that our Saviour *"desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4)*. This, and nothing else, is the purpose of the Church: the salvation of individual souls. For this reason the Father sent his Son, and in the Lord's own words transmitted to us in the Gospel of Saint John, *"as the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20:21)*. Hence the mandate to preach the Gospel: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:19-20)*. These words are simple yet sublime; they speak of our duty to proclaim the truth of the faith, the urgent need for the sacramental life, and the promise of Christ's continual assistance to his Church. These are fundamental realities: they speak of instructing people in the faith and in Christian morality, and of celebrating the sacraments. Wherever God and his will are unknown, wherever faith in Jesus Christ and in his sacramental presence is lacking, the essential element for the solution of pressing social and political problems is also missing. Fidelity to the primacy of God and of his will, known and lived in communion with Jesus Christ, is the essential gift that we Bishops and priests must offer to our people (cf. *Populorum Progressio*,

21).

3. Our ministry as Bishops thus impels us to discern God's saving will and to devise a pastoral plan capable of training God's People to recognize and embrace transcendent values, in fidelity to the Lord and to the Gospel.

Certainly the present is a difficult time for the Church, and many of her children are experiencing difficulty. Society is experiencing moments of worrying disorientation. The sanctity of marriage and the family are attacked with impunity, as concessions are made to forms of pressure which have a harmful effect on legislative processes; crimes against life are justified in the name of individual freedom and rights; attacks are made on the dignity of the human person; the plague of divorce and extra-marital unions is increasingly widespread. Even more: when, within the Church herself, people start to question the value of the priestly commitment as a total entrustment to God through apostolic celibacy and as a total openness to the service of souls, and preference is given to ideological, political and even party issues, the structure of total consecration to God begins to lose its deepest meaning. How can we not be deeply saddened by this? But be confident: the Church is holy and imperishable (cf. *Eph 5:27*). As Saint Augustine said: "The Church will be shaken if its foundation is shaken; but will Christ be shaken? Since Christ cannot be shaken, the Church will remain firmly established to the end of time" (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 103, 2, 5: PL 37, 1353).

A particular problem which you face as Pastors is surely the issue of those Catholics who have abandoned the life of the Church. It seems clear that the principal cause of this problem is to be found in the lack of an evangelization completely centred on Christ and his Church. Those who are most vulnerable to the aggressive proselytizing of sects—a just cause for concern—and those who are incapable of resisting the onslaught of agnosticism, relativism and secularization are generally the baptized who remain insufficiently evangelized; they are easily influenced because their faith is weak, confused, easily shaken and naive, despite their innate religiosity. In the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, I stated that "being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (no. 1). Consequently, there is a need to engage in apostolic activity as a true mission in the midst of the flock that is constituted by the Catholic Church in Brazil, and to promote on every level a methodical evangelization aimed at personal and communal fidelity to Christ. *No effort should be spared in seeking out those Catholics who have fallen away and those who know little or nothing of Jesus Christ*, by implementing a pastoral plan which welcomes them and helps them realize that the Church is a privileged place of encounter with God, and also through a continuing process of catechesis.

What is required, in a word, is a mission of evangelization capable of engaging all the vital energies present in this immense flock. My thoughts turn to the priests, the men and women religious and the laity who work so generously, often in the face of immense difficulties, in order to

spread the truth of the Gospel. Many of them cooperate with or actively participate in the associations, movements and other new ecclesial realities that, in communion with the Pastors and in harmony with diocesan guidelines, bring their spiritual, educational and missionary richness to the heart of the Church, as a precious experience and a model of Christian life.

In this work of evangelization the ecclesial community should be clearly marked by pastoral initiatives, especially by sending missionaries, lay or religious, to homes on the outskirts of the cities and in the interior, to enter into dialogue with everyone in a spirit of understanding, sensitivity and charity. On the other hand, if the persons they encounter are living in poverty, it is necessary to help them, as the first Christian communities did, by practising solidarity and making them feel truly loved. The poor living in the outskirts of the cities or the countryside need to feel that the Church is close to them, providing for their most urgent needs, defending their rights and working together with them to build a society founded on justice and peace. The Gospel is addressed in a special way to the poor, and the Bishop, modelled on the Good Shepherd, must be particularly concerned with offering them the divine consolation of the faith, without overlooking their need for "material bread". As I wished to stress in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, "the Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the sacraments and the word" (no. 22).

The sacramental life, especially in the celebration of Confession and the Eucharist, here takes on a particular importance. As Pastors, it is your primary task to ensure that the faithful share in the eucharistic life and in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You must be vigilant to ensure that the confession and absolution of sins is ordinarily individual, inasmuch as sin itself is something profoundly personal (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 31, III). Only physical or moral impossibility exempts the faithful from this form of confession, in which case reconciliation can be obtained by some other means (cf. *Code of Canon Law, can. 960, Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 311). It is appropriate, therefore, to instil in priests the practice of generously making themselves available to the faithful who have recourse to the sacrament of God's mercy (cf. Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei*, 2).

4. Starting afresh from Christ in every area of missionary activity; rediscovering in Jesus the love and salvation given to us by the Father through the Holy Spirit: this is the substance and lifeline of the episcopal mission which makes the Bishop the person primarily responsible for catechesis in his diocese. Indeed, it falls ultimately to him to direct catechesis, surrounding himself with competent and trustworthy co-workers. *It is therefore clear that the catechist's task is not simply to communicate faith-experiences; rather—under the guidance of the Pastor—it is to be an authentic herald of revealed truths.* Faith is a journey led by the Holy Spirit which can be summed up in two words: conversion and discipleship. In the Christian tradition, these two key words clearly indicate that faith in Christ implies a way of living based on the twofold command to love God and neighbour—and they also express life's social dimension.

Truth presupposes a clear understanding of Jesus' message transmitted by means of an intelligible, inculturated language, which must nevertheless remain faithful to the Gospel's intent. At this time, there is an urgent need for an adequate knowledge of the faith as it is presented in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and its accompanying *Compendium*. Education in Christian personal and social virtues is also an essential part of catechesis, as is education in social responsibility. Precisely because faith, life, and the celebration of the sacred liturgy—the source of faith and life—are inseparable, there is need for a more correct implementation of the liturgical principles as indicated by the Second Vatican Council, as well as those contained in the *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops* (cf. 145-151), so as to restore to the liturgy its sacred character. It was with this end in view that my Venerable Predecessor on the Chair of Peter, John Paul II, wished "to appeal urgently that the liturgical norms for the celebration of the Eucharist be observed with great fidelity ... Liturgy is never anyone's private property, be it of the celebrant or of the community in which the mysteries are celebrated" (Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 52). For Bishops, who are the "moderators of the Church's liturgical life", the rediscovery and appreciation of obedience to liturgical norms is a form of witness to the one, universal Church, that presides in charity.

5. A leap forward in the quality of people's Christian lives is needed, so that they can bear witness to their faith in a clear and transparent way. This faith, as it is celebrated and shared in the liturgy and in works of charity, nourishes and reinvigorates the community of the Lord's disciples while building them up as the missionary and prophetic Church. The Brazilian Episcopate has an impressive structure based on recently revised and more easily implemented statutes which focus more directly on the good of the Church. The Pope has come to Brazil to ask that, through following the word of God, all these Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate truly become messengers of *eternal salvation for all those who obey Christ* (cf. *Heb* 5:9). If we are to stay true to our solemn commitment as successors of the Apostles, we Pastors must be faithful servants of the word, eschewing any reductive or mistaken vision of the mission entrusted to us. It is not enough to look at reality solely from the viewpoint of personal faith; we must work with the Gospel in our hands and anchor ourselves in the authentic heritage of the Apostolic Tradition, free from any interpretations motivated by rationalistic ideologies.

Indeed, "within the particular Churches, it is the Bishop's responsibility to guard and interpret the word of God and to make authoritative judgments as to what is or is not in conformity with it" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, 19). As the primary Teacher of faith and doctrine, the Bishop will rely on collaboration with the theologian, who, in order "to be faithful to his role of service to the truth, must take into account the proper mission of the Magisterium and collaborate with it" (*ibid.*, 20). The duty to preserve the deposit of faith and safeguard its unity calls for strict vigilance so that the faith may be "preserved and handed down with fidelity and so that particular insights are clearly integrated into the one Gospel of Christ" (*Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, 126).

This, therefore, is the enormous responsibility you have assumed as formators of your people, and especially of the priests and religious under your care. They are your faithful co-workers. I am aware of your commitment to seeking ways of forming new vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Theological formation, as well as education in sacred sciences, needs to be constantly updated, but this must always be done in accord with the Church's authentic Magisterium.

I appeal to your priestly zeal and your sense of vocational discernment, especially so that you will know how to bring to completion the spiritual, psychological and affective, intellectual and pastoral formation needed to prepare young people for mature, generous service to the Church. Good and assiduous spiritual direction is indispensable for fostering human growth and eliminating the risk of going astray in the area of sexuality. Always keep in mind that priestly celibacy "is a gift which the Church has received and desires to retain, convinced that it is a good for the Church itself and for the world" (*Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 57).

I would also like to commend to your care the religious communities which play such an important role in the lives of your dioceses. They offer their own valuable contribution since "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Cor 12:4). The Church cannot help but show its joy and gratitude for all that religious men and women are able to contribute in universities, schools, hospitals, and other works and institutions.

6. I am familiar with the dynamic of your Assemblies and the efforts involved in formulating the various pastoral plans so that they give priority to the formation of clergy and those who assist them in their pastoral work. Some of you have encouraged evangelization movements to assist in the work of gathering groups of faithful together to carry out certain types of action. The Successor of Peter is relying on you to ensure that the preparation you give them is always based on a spirituality of communion and fidelity to the See of Peter, so that the work of the Spirit is never in vain. In fact, *the integrity of the faith, together with ecclesiastical discipline, is and will always be an area requiring careful oversight on your part, especially when it comes to living out the consequences of the fact that "there is only one faith and one baptism"*.

As you know, among the various documents dealing with Christian unity, there is the *Directory for Ecumenism* published by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Ecumenism—or the search for unity among Christians—has become in our time an increasingly urgent task for the Catholic Church, as is evident from the growth of intercultural exchange and the challenge of secularism. Consequently, given the rapidly growing number of new Christian denominations, and especially certain forms of often aggressive proselytism, the work of ecumenism has become more complex. In this context, a good historical and doctrinal formation is absolutely essential, so as to foster necessary discernment and lead to a better understanding of the specific identity of each of these communities, the elements that divide them, and those elements that can be helpful on the road to greater unity. The greatest area of common ground for collaboration should be the defence of fundamental moral values—transmitted by the biblical tradition—against the relativistic

and consumerist cultural forces that seek to destroy them. Another such area is faith in God the Creator and in Jesus Christ his incarnate Son. Moreover, there will always be the principle of fraternal love and the search for mutual understanding and *rapprochement*. Yet we must also be concerned with defending the faith of our people, confirming them in the joyful certitude that "*unica Christi Ecclesia...subsistit in Ecclesia catholica, a successore Petri et Episcopis in eius communione gubernata*" ["The one Church of Christ...subsists in the Catholic Church which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him"] (*Lumen Gentium*, 8).

In this way, through the National Council of Christian Churches, you will be able to move towards candid ecumenical dialogue, committing yourselves to complete respect for those other religious confessions that wish to remain in contact with the Catholic Church in Brazil.

7. There is nothing new in the observation that your country is living through a historic deficit in social development, whose extreme effects can be seen in the vast cross-section of Brazilians living in need and the great inequalities in income, even at the highest levels of society. It is your task, my dear Brothers, as the hierarchy of the people of God, to promote the search for new solutions imbued with the Christian spirit. A vision of the economy and social problems from the perspective of the Church's social teaching should always bring us to consider things from the viewpoint of human dignity, which transcends the simple interplay of economic factors. Hence, it is necessary to work untiringly to form politicians, and all Brazilians who wield a certain influence, be it great or small, as well as all members of society, so that they can fully assume their responsibilities and learn to give the economy a truly human and compassionate face.

There is a need to form a genuine spirit of truthfulness and honesty among the political and commercial classes. Those who take on leadership roles in society must try to foresee the social consequences—direct and indirect, short-term and long-term—of their own decisions, always acting according to the criteria that will maximize the common good, rather than merely seeking personal profit.

8. God willing, my dear Brothers, we will find other opportunities to explore these questions that call for our joint pastoral concern. For now, without pursuing them in an exhaustive way, I have tried to put forward the more significant themes that clamour for my attention as Pastor of the universal Church. I offer you my affectionate encouragement, which is at the same time a fraternal and heart-felt plea: that you will always work and act—as indeed you are doing now—in a spirit of harmony, building yourselves on the communion that finds its highest expression and inexhaustible source in the Eucharist. Entrusting all of you to Mary Most Holy, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, I cordially impart to each of you, as well as your respective communities, my Apostolic Blessing.

Thank you!

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