



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF AUSTRIA
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

Thursday, 30 January 2014

Dear Brothers,

I am delighted that this intense encounter with you, in the context of your *ad limina* visit, allows me to share in some of the fruits of the Church in Austria and to give something to this Church in return. I thank your President, Cardinal Schönborn, for his courteous words which assure me that we are continuing together along the path of proclaiming Christ's salvation. Each one of us represents Christ, the One mediator of salvation, and renders his priestly action accessible and perceptible to the community, thereby helping to make God's love ever more present in the world.

Eight years ago, the Austrian Bishop's Conference, on the occasion of their *ad limina* visit, came on pilgrimage to the Tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and met with the Roman Curia in consultation. On that occasion, most of you also met with my venerable Predecessor [Pope Benedict XVI](#), who at that time had been in office only a few months. The years immediately following were marked by the Austrian people's affection for the Church and the Successor of Peter. This was seen, for example, in the people's warm welcome, despite the inclement weather, during the [Papal Visit to commemorate the 850th anniversary of the Shrine of Mariazell](#) in 2007. A difficult period for the Church followed thereafter, symptomatic of this was the downward trend in the number of Catholics in proportion to the total population in Austria, which has various causes and has been going on for several decades. This development should not find us inert; indeed, it should encourage our efforts for the new evangelization which is always needed. On the other hand, we see an increase in the readiness to show solidarity; *Caritas* and other charitable works are receiving generous donations. The contribution made by the ecclesiastical institutions in the fields of education and healthcare is also much appreciated by all and constitutes an essential part of Austrian society.

We can thank God for all that the Church in Austria does for the salvation of the faithful and for the good of so many people, and I myself would like to express my gratitude to each of you, and through you to the priests, deacons, men and women religious and committed laity who work readily and generously in the vineyard of the Lord. And yet we must not only administer what we have achieved and what is available; God's field must continually be tilled and cultivated to ensure that it may also bear fruit in the future. Being the Church does not mean managing, but rather going out, being missionaries, taking the light of faith and the joy of the Gospel to people. Let us not forget that the impulse for our commitment as Christians in the world is not the idea of philanthropy or a vague humanism, but rather a gift of God, that is, the gift of divine sonship that we received in Baptism. And this gift also entails a duty. The children of God do not hide; rather, they bring the joy of their divine sonship to the world. And this also means committing oneself to lead a holy life. This, moreover, is our duty to the Church, which is holy, as we profess in the *Creed*. Certainly, "the Church clasps sinners to her bosom", as the Second Vatican Council stated (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8). However, the Council states in this same passage that we must not resign ourselves to sin, that is, "*Ecclesia sancta simul et semper purificanda*" — the holy Church is always in need of purification. And this means that we must always be committed to our purification, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Confession is the place where we experience the merciful love of God and where we meet Christ, who gives us strength for conversion and new life. And as pastors of the Church we want to assist the faithful, with tenderness and understanding, in rediscovering this wonderful Sacrament and enabling them to experience, precisely in this gift, the love of the Good Shepherd. I beg you, therefore, never grow weary of inviting people to encounter Christ in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

An important field of our work as pastors is the family. It lies at the heart of the evangelizing Church. "The Christian family, in fact, is the first community called to announce the Gospel to the human person during growth and to bring him or her, through a progressive education and catechesis, to full human and Christian maturity" (*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 2). Marital fidelity is above all the foundation upon which a harmonious family life can be built. Unfortunately, in our time, we see that the family and marriage are undergoing a deep inner crisis in the countries of the Western world. "In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 66). Globalization and postmodern individualism promote a lifestyle that makes it much more difficult to develop stable bonds between people, and it is not conducive to promoting a culture of the family. This opens up a new mission field for the Church, for example, among groups of families where opportunities are created for interpersonal relationships and for a relationship with God, where authentic communion that welcomes everyone equally can grow, that does not close itself off into groups of the *élite*, that heals wounds, builds bridges, goes in search of the lost and helps "to bear one another's burdens" (Gal 6:2).

The family, therefore, is a privileged place for evangelization and the living transmission of the

faith. Let us do everything possible to ensure that our families pray and experience and transmit the faith as an integral part of daily life. The Church's concern for the family begins with the proper preparation and appropriate support of spouses, as well as the faithful and clear explanation of the Church's doctrine on marriage and on the family. Sacramental marriage is a gift of God as well as a commitment. The love of two spouses is sanctified by Christ, and a married couple is called to bear witness to and cultivate this sanctity through their faithful love for one another.

From the family, the Domestic Church, let us now briefly move on to the parish, to the great field of the Lord which he has entrusted to us in order to make it fruitful through pastoral work. Priests, parish priests should always be mindful that their task of governing is a profoundly spiritual service. It is always the parish priest who must lead the parish community, relying at the same time on the help and the valuable contribution of their various co-workers and on all the lay faithful. We must not run the risk of clouding the sacramental ministry of the priest. In our cities and villages there are brave men and others who are timid, there are Christian missionaries and others who are asleep. And there are many who are searching, even if they do not admit it. Everyone is called, everyone is sent out. However, the place of the call is not necessarily the parish centre; the moment is not necessarily a pleasant parish event. The call of God can reach us on the assembly line and in the office, in the supermarket and in the stairwell, i.e., in the places of everyday life.

Speaking about God, bringing the message of God's love and salvation in Jesus Christ to men is the duty of all the baptized. And this duty involves, not only speaking with words, but in all one's actions and way of doing things. Our whole being should speak of God, even in the ordinary things. In this way witness is authentic, and thus shall it always be new and fresh in the power of the Holy Spirit. In order to achieve this, speaking about God must first be a speaking with God, an encounter with the living God in prayer and the Sacraments. God not only lets himself be found, but also sets his love in motion to reach out to those who seek him. Whoever trusts in God's love knows how to open the hearts of others to divine love in order to show them that life in its fullness is realized only in communion with God. In our own time, when we seem to have become the "little flock" (Lk 12:32), we are called as disciples of the Lord to live as a community that is the salt of the earth and the light of the world (cf. Mt 5:13-16).

May the Holy Virgin Mary, who is our Mother, and whom you venerate in a special way as *Magna Mater Austriae*, help us to open ourselves, as she did, totally to the Lord and thus to be capable of showing others the way to the Living God who gives life.