



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF SRI LANKA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 3 May 2014

Dear Brother Bishops,

It is a great joy for me to welcome you here on your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*, which serves to renew your communion with the Successor of Peter and provides an opportunity to reflect on the life of the Church in Sri Lanka. I thank Cardinal Ranjith for his warm words of greeting from you and from all the faithful of your local Churches. I ask you to convey my greeting and love to them, and to express my solidarity and care. I recall with affection my recent meeting in Saint Peter's Basilica with members of the Sri Lankan community during the pilgrimage to Rome to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the consecration of your country to the Blessed Mother. It is my hope for you, dear Brothers, that these days of reflection and prayer may confirm you in the faith and in knowledge of the many gifts that you, the priests, consecrated men and women, and lay faithful have received in Christ.

I wish now to share some reflections with you on this treasure, which is at the heart of our life in the Church and our mission to society, the beauty and richness of which we saw so clearly in the Year of Faith. Our faith and the gifts we have received cannot be stored away, but are meant to be freely shared and to find expression in our daily lives. For our vocation is to be a "leaven in the midst of humanity ... proclaiming and bringing God's salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope, and strengthened on the way" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 114). Sri Lanka particularly needs this leaven. After many years of fighting and bloodshed, the war in your country has finally ended. Indeed, a new dawn of hope has arisen as people now look to rebuild their lives and their communities. In response to this, through your recent Pastoral Letter *Towards Reconciliation and Rebuilding of our Nation*, you sought to reach out to all Sri Lankans with a prophetic message inspired by the Gospel that seeks to accompany

them in their trials. Though the war has ended, you rightly note that much work needs to be done to promote reconciliation, to respect the human rights of all the people and to overcome the ethnic tensions that remain. I would like to join you in offering a particular word of consolation to all those who lost loved ones during the war and remain uncertain as to their fate. Mindful of Saint Paul's appeal to bear one another's burdens (cf. *Gal 6:2*), may your communities, steadfast in the faith, remain close to those who still mourn and suffer the lasting effects of war.

As you have expressed, the Catholics of Sri Lanka wish to contribute, together with the various elements of society, to the work of reconciliation and rebuilding. One such contribution is the promotion of unity. Indeed, as the country seeks to come together and heal, the Church is uniquely positioned to provide a living image of unity in the faith as she is blessed to count both Sinhalese and Tamil among her number. In parishes and schools, in social programmes and other institutions of the Church, Sinhalese and Tamil find opportunities to live, study, work and worship together. Through these same entities, especially through parishes and missions, you also know intimately the concerns and fears of the people, particularly how they can be marginalized and distrust one another. The faithful, knowledgeable of the issues that cause tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamil, can provide an atmosphere of dialogue that seeks to construct a more just and equitable society.

Another important contribution of the Church to redevelopment is her charitable work, which shows forth the merciful face of Christ. *Caritas Sri Lanka* is to be commended for its outreach following the 2004 tsunami and for its efforts on behalf of post-war reconciliation and rebuilding, especially in the most affected regions. The Church in Sri Lanka also gives generous service in the areas of education, healthcare and outreach to the poor. While the country has enjoyed increased economic development, this prophetic witness of service and compassion becomes even more important: it shows that the poor must not be forgotten nor inequality permitted to grow. Rather, your ministry and outreach must work for the inclusion of all in society, because "until exclusion and inequality in society and between peoples is reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 59).

Sri Lanka is a country not only of rich ethnic diversity, but also of various religious traditions; this highlights the importance of interreligious and ecumenical dialogue for fostering mutual knowledge and enrichment. Your efforts in this regard are commendable and bearing fruit. They allow the Church to collaborate more easily with others in securing a lasting peace, and ensure the Church's freedom in pursuing her proper ends, especially in educating young people in the faith and in witnessing freely to Christian life. Sri Lanka has also seen, however, the rise of religious extremists who, in promoting a false sense of national unity based on a single religious identity, have created tensions through various acts of intimidation and violence. Though these tensions may threaten interreligious and ecumenical relations, the Church in Sri Lanka must remain steadfast in seeking partners in peace and interlocutors in dialogue. Acts of intimidation also affect the Catholic community, and so it is ever more necessary to confirm the people in their faith. The

Church's initiatives in developing small communities centred on the Word of God and in fostering popular piety are exemplary ways of assuring the faithful of the closeness of Christ and his Church to them.

In the important task of transmitting the faith and of promoting reconciliation and dialogue, you are aided in the first place by your priests. I join you in thanking God for the many priestly vocations he has raised up among the faithful of Sri Lanka. Indeed, the many local priests who serve the People of God are a great blessing and a direct fruit of the missionary seeds planted long ago. So that your priests may give worthy service and be true shepherds, I urge you to be attentive to their human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral formation, not only in their years of seminary training, but also throughout their lives of generous service. Be true fathers to them, attentive to their needs and present in their lives, recognizing that they often minister in difficult situations and with limited resources. With you, I thank them for their fidelity and witness, as I call them to ever greater holiness through prayer and daily conversion.

I also join you in giving thanks to Almighty God for the ministry and witness of the consecrated men and women and all the laity who support and serve the apostolates of the Church and who faithfully live out their Christian lives. Together with the clergy, and in communion with you as the Pastors of the local Churches, they show forth the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, who transforms the Church and makes us all a leaven to the world. Their vocation is crucial to the spread of the Gospel and is increasingly important, especially in the vast rural communities and in the field of education, where trained catechists are often lacking. Since the ministry of the Bishop is never carried out in isolation, but always in concert with all the baptized, I encourage you continue to assist the faithful in recognizing their gifts and in placing them at the service of the Church.

Lastly, I appreciate your efforts to minister to the family, that "fundamental cell of society where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another, ...where parents pass on the faith to their children" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 66). The forthcoming Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will discuss the family and seek ever new and creative ways in which the Church can support these domestic churches. In Sri Lanka, the war has left many families displaced and grieving the death of those closest to them. Many have lost their employment and so families have been separated as spouses leave their homes to find work. There is also the great challenge and increasing reality of mixed marriages, which require greater attention to preparation and assistance to couples in providing for the faith formation of their children. When we are attentive to our families and their needs, when we understand their difficulties and hopes, we strengthen the Church's witness and proclamation of the Gospel. Particularly by supporting marital love and fidelity, we help the faithful to live their vocation freely and joyfully, and we open new generations to the life of Christ and his Church. Your efforts in support of the family assist not only the Church, but aid Sri Lankan society as a whole, especially in its efforts for reconciliation and unity. I urge you, therefore, to be ever vigilant and to work with governmental authorities and

other religious leaders to ensure that the dignity and primacy of the family is upheld.

With these sentiments, my dear Brothers, I entrust you to the intercession of Our Lady of Lanka, as I willingly extend my Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the beloved priests, consecrated men and women, and lay people of Sri Lanka.