



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO A GROUP OF BISHOPS FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM» VISIT**

Saturday, 3 December 1983

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

With deep fraternal affection I extend to you a cordial welcome to the See of Peter and willingly share with you this special hour of collegial unity and ecclesial communion. Through you I send my greetings of love and peace to the local Churches that you represent and serve: to all the priests, deacons, religious, seminarians and lay people, who under your pastoral leadership are striving to live to the full the mystery of Christ and his Church. And in your persons I desire to honour Jesus Christ, the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls (Cfr. *1 Petr.* 2, 25).

1. I have already had the occasion to speak to another group of American Bishops about the Church's celebration of Sunday, and hence in particular about the Sunday Eucharistic celebration. Today I would like to make reference in a wider context to *the sacred liturgy and prayer* as they relate to the ministry of Bishops and to the life of the Church. Immediately before his Ascension, Jesus assured his Apostles that they would receive Holy Spirit and be clothed with power. As they awaited the fulfilment of Christ's promise, "they were to be found in the temple constantly, speaking the praises of God" (*Luc.* 24, 53). As Successors of the Apostles, the Bishops are called upon to continue through the liturgy of the Church the great apostolic activity of praising God. Especially in the liturgy *each Bishop is a sign of the praying Christ*, a sign of the Christ who speaks to his Father, saying: "I offer you praise, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (*Ibid.* 10, 21). The liturgy is the greatest instrument of praise, petition, intercession and reparation that the Church possesses. At no other moment in the ministry of the Bishop is his activity more relevant or useful to God's people than when he offers the Church's Sacrifice of praise.

As a pastor of Christ's flock, the Bishop experiences personally *the need to thank God for the*

mystery of Christ's Cross and Resurrection as it is actually lived each day in the pilgrim Church over which he presides and which he serves. The Bishop praises and blesses "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*1 Petr.* 1, 3) for the marvels of grace that have been accomplished in the Christian people through the blood of Christ: for the fidelity to Christ that is lived by so many priests and religious and by countless families in the world; for the splendid efforts made by young people to follow Christ's teaching; for the gift of conversion constantly given to the faithful in the Sacrament of Penance; for every vocation to the priesthood and religious life; for the paschal combat and for the victory over evil that the Lord continually effects in his Body, the Church; for the good that is accomplished every day in the name of Jesus; for the gift of eternal life that is given to all who eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood, and for everything that God has given to his people in giving them his Son.

2. The liturgy occupies *a place of capital importance in the life of the Church*. The *full and active participation* in the liturgy has so rightly been pointed out by the Second Vatican Council as "the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14). This principle is vital for a proper understanding of conciliar renewal, and deserves repeated emphasis. Equally vital is an understanding of the liturgy as being "above all the worship of the divine majesty" (*Ibid.* 33). As such, it must be approached by our priests and people with that sense of profound reverence which corresponds to the deepest instincts of their Catholic faith. The liturgy in itself contains a special power to bring about renewal and holiness, and the people's awareness of this power - its contemplation in faith - actuates it even more. I recently expressed this to the Bishops of America in this way: "When our people, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, realize that they are called to be 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation' (*1 Petr.* 2, 9), and that they are called to adore and thank the Father in union with Jesus Christ, *an immense power is unleashed* in their Christian lives. When they realize that they actually have a Sacrifice of praise and expiation to offer together with Jesus Christ, when they realize that all their prayers of petition are united to an infinite act of the praying Christ, then there is fresh hope and encouragement for the Christian people" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II, *Allocutio ad quosdam episcopos e Foederatis Statibus Americae Septemtrionalis occasione oblata "ad Limina" visitationis coram admissos*, 3, die 9 iul. 1983).

3. *The true Christian spirit* that the faithful derive from the liturgy ensures the building up of the Church in many ways. Through the acquisition by her members of this Christian spirit, the Church becomes ever more *a community of worship and prayer*, conscious of "the necessity of praying always and not losing heart" (*Luc.* 18, 1). This characteristic of constant prayer, as befits the Body of Christ, is manifested in the official prayer of the liturgy: in the Eucharist, in the celebration of the other sacraments and in the Liturgy of the Hours. In all these actions, the mediation of Christ the Head continues, and the whole Church is offered to the Father: the entire Body of Christ intercedes for the salvation of the world.

At the same time the Church realizes that her vital activity and hence her duty to pray is not

restricted to liturgical prayer. The Council has explicitly stated: “The spiritual life however is not confined to participation in the liturgy” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 12). Christ still asks *individual prayer* from all of us his members, repeating his injunction: “Pray to your Father in private” (*Matth.* 6, 6). Among non-liturgical forms of prayer, one that is worthy of special esteem is the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In addition, every effort to make the Christian family a place of prayer deserves our full encouragement and support.

4. The liturgy is eminently effective in rendering the Church an ever more dynamic *community of truth*. In the liturgy, the truth of God is celebrated and his word becomes the sustenance of the people that glories in his name. By its power, the liturgy helps us to assimilate what is proclaimed and celebrated in our midst. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “When I found your words, I devoured them; they became my joy and the happiness of my heart, because I bore your name, O Lord, God of hosts” (*Jer.* 15, 16). Through the sacred liturgy the People of God receive the strength to live God’s word in their lives: to be doers of that word and not hearers only (Cfr. *Jac.* 1, 23).

5. The sacred liturgy, and in particular the Eucharistic Sacrifice, is the *source of the Church’s internal unity* - “that unity which is tarnished on the human face of the Church by every form of sin, but which subsists indestructibly in the Catholic Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 2,3)” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II, *Allocutio ad sacros Praesules Conferentiae Episcopalis Foederatorum Statuum Americae Septemtrionalis, in Seminario habita*, 8, die 5 oct. 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, III/2 [1979] 639). And while the celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass and participation in the Supper of the Lord already require this Catholic unity, it is through them that we pour out to God our earnest desire for that complete unity in faith and love that Christ desires for all his followers. In the Eucharist the Church declares her desire for perfect conformity to Christ’s will: for ever greater purification, conversion and renewal.

6. *The relationship of worship and prayer to service and action* has a deep meaning for the Church. The Church considers herself called from worship into service; at the same time she looks upon her service as related to her prayer. She attaches extreme importance to the example of Christ, whose actions were all accompanied by prayer and accomplished in the Holy Spirit. For all Christ’s disciples the principle is the same and, as Bishops, we must help our people never to forget this essential aspect of their service; it is a *specifically Christian and ecclesial dimension of action*.

It is indeed in prayer that a social consciousness is nurtured and at the same time evaluated. It is in prayer that the Bishop, together with his people, ponder *the need and exigencies of Christian service*. Seven years ago, in his message to the Call to Action Conference in Detroit, Paul VI formulated important principles, stating: “The Lord Jesus does not want us ever to forget that the mark of our discipleship is concern for our brethren . . . Yes, the cause of human dignity and of human rights is the cause of Christ and his Gospel. Jesus of Nazareth is forever identified with his brethren”. Through prayer the Church realizes the full import of Christ’s word: “This is how all will

know you for my disciples: your love for one another” (*Jo.* 13, 55). It is in prayer that the Church understands the many implications of the fact that justice and mercy are among “the weightier matters of the law” (*Matth.* 23, 23). Through prayer, the struggle for justice finds its proper motivation and encouragement, and discovers and maintains truly effective means.

Only a worshipping and praying Church can show herself sufficiently sensitive to the needs of the sick, the suffering, the lonely - especially in the great urban centres - and the poor everywhere. The Church as *a community of service* has first to feel the weight of the burden carried by so many individuals and families, and then strive to help alleviate these burdens. The discipleship that the Church discovers in prayer she expresses in deep interest for Christ’s brethren in the modern world and for their many different needs. Her concern, manifested in various ways, embraces - among others - the areas of housing, education, health care, unemployment, the administration of justice, the special needs of the aged and the handicapped. In prayer, the Church is confirmed in her solidarity with the weak who are oppressed, the vulnerable who are manipulated, the children who are exploited, and everyone who is in any way discriminated against.

The Church’s service in all these fields must take on specific and concrete forms, and this requires understanding and competence on the part of the various members of the ecclesial community. But *the whole program of diakonia must be sustained by prayer*, by vital contact with the Christ who insists on linking discipleship with service. For this reason Paul VI concluded his message to the Detroit Conference with these insights: “In the tradition of the Church, any call to action is first of all a call to prayer. And so you are summoned to prayer, and above all to a greater sharing in Christ’s Eucharistic Sacrifice . . . It is in the Eucharist that you find the true Christian spirit that will enable you to go out and act in Christ’s name”.

7. There is moreover a real relationship between the peace that is proclaimed and actuated in the Eucharist and all the initiatives of the Church to bring Christ’s peace to the world. Your own dedicated efforts to promote peace and to help establish in the world those conditions that favour peace are, like peace itself, totally dependent on God’s grace. And this grace, this strength, this help is God’s gift to us, given freely, but given also because it is sought in the name of Jesus, through prayer, through the Eucharist. Your local Churches are called to be *communities promoting peace, living peace, invoking peace*.

8. In every other sector, too, of Christian life, the Church lives out her nature and reaches her aims by prayer and worship. Indeed, it is in this way that she becomes ever more *a communion of love*. And we, as Bishops in the Church of God, are called to make our specific contribution to the building up of the communion of love by our own *practice of collegiality*, by every personal effort that we expend to promote, defend and consolidate the unity of faith and discipline between the local Churches and the universal Church. And all of these efforts are conceived in prayer and effected through union with the praying Christ. It is supremely significant that in the very act - the offering of the Eucharistic Sacrifice - in which your local Churches attain their deepest identity as a

community of worship and a communion of love, you and I are mentioned by name. The identity of our Catholic people and the authenticity of their worship are forever linked to our own ministry, which is none other than the ministry of Jesus Christ, through whom and with whom and in whom all glory and honour is given to the Father and every prayer attains its efficacy.

The worship that animates your local Churches, the inspiration for *diakonia* and the whole true Christian spirit that derives from the Church's liturgy are by their essence Christocentric, and directed to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, every prayer we offer for our people is made with Christ the Lord and High Priest of our salvation. And because our prayer as Bishops is also apostolic, we make it together with Mary the Mother of Jesus (Cfr. *Act.* 1, 14).

Dear brother Bishops, in praying with Mary we shall discover ever more clearly *the meaning of our pastoral ministry of worship, of prayer and of service* to Christ's Church and to the modern world.

© Copyright 1983 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana