



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO INDIA

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II ON OCCASION OF THE MEETING WITH THE CLERGY IN THE CATHEDRAL OF BOM JESUS

Velha, Goa (India)

Friday, 7 February 1986

Dear brother Priests of India,

1. I greet, you most warmly in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, those here present and those who have not been able to come. I greet each of you with deep affection and gratitude.

It pleases me that this meeting with the clergy of India is taking place in the Basilica of Bom Jesus where the remains of Saint Francis Xavier are venerated. For this great Jesuit missionary has left to all of us priests an inspiring example of personal holiness, an exceptional thirst for souls, and an ardent zeal to share our spiritual riches with the brothers and sisters among whom we live. I am also reminded of the missionary zeal of Father Joseph Vaz and Father Agnelo De Souza who, by their priestly example of self-sacrifice and generous pastoral service, inspire us all. And, as you know, in two days, I shall have the joy of beatifying here in India one of your own brother priests: Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a priest whose love for the Church inspired him to serve her in so many varied apostolates and motivated him to work tirelessly for the Church's unity and spiritual growth.

Dear brothers in Christ: you continue in our own day the same priestly service of these illustrious predecessors. Like them, you represent in the midst of the people of God the one High Priest, Jesus Christ. It is his priesthood that we all share. In union with your bishops and with the Bishop of Rome, you are committed to the one saving mission of our Saviour, who came "to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his Cross" . You are heralds of the Gospel and builders of unity in this great land of India. You are servants of the Church in this land enriched by God with such a variety of natural gifts and human resources, such a bounty of cultural traditions, and yet a land in need of many human endeavours for its progress and development.

As I greet you most cordially, I also wish to express my admiration for the excellent work you are doing, often under difficult conditions. Yours is a life of dedication to Christ, a vocation demanding great sacrifices and imposing many obligations, but a way of loving Christ and his people which brings with it a generous portion of peace, satisfaction and joy. I pray that my words today will encourage you, all of you, to continue to be faithful and generous in your consecrated service.

2. The Second Vatican Council reminded us that "the People of God finds its unity first of all through the Word of the living God, which is quite properly sought from the lips of priests. Since no one can be saved who has not first believed, priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have as their primary duty the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all" . These words of the Council point to the heart of our priestly vocation: the proclamation of the word of God. These words should help us to set priorities of time and commitments, and to keep clearly before our eyes the primary role that we must fulfil in the Church.

As priests, we owe it to our people to be men totally imbued with the word of God, constantly seeking to penetrate its mystery and meaning, ever eager to share the truth of the Gospel with others.

I know that the Sacred Scriptures of the Church, together with the revered writings of other religions, are venerated and held in honour in India. And those who are considered the sages of India are the people who meditate and nourish themselves on these books. As priests in this land you too must be sages. The written word of God and the Tradition of the Church as interpreted and presented by the Magisterium should be a constant object of study, reflection and prayer. Thus you will be able to preach God's word to your people with ever greater conviction and persuasion, for it will first have taken root in your own lives. And be assured that fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church will be a guarantee of the real effectiveness of your priestly ministry.

The gurus in India have been known as spiritual teachers playing a prominent role in the transmission and development of religious truths. The importance of a guru as mediator of divine truth is recognised in India. The necessity of having the saving truth come from one who is the manifestation of God is again well known in the Indian religious tradition. How much more zealously should priests fulfil their mission as spiritual guides to the people entrusted to their care, transmitting the Gospel truth to them more faithfully! How seriously are they called upon to be mediators between God and men in the saving world and the Sacraments! With what earnestness do not the people expect from our priests the life-giving nourishment that is to be found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

3. It is as servants of the Word that I encourage you in your efforts to form and strengthen your Christian communities in sound doctrine, transmitting to them the full content of the faith. Spare no effort to perform this task by making use of all the modern methods available. Give particular attention to children and youth, while not neglecting the catechesis of adults, adapted to the needs

of various groups.

It is through such carefully programmed Christian formation of the people entrusted to your care that you will succeed in forming a truly enlightened and zealous laity, capable of assuming with vigour their responsibility in the Church and in the world. While helping to form Christian communities of deep faith, buoyant hope and active love, the laity will then be enabled to take upon themselves the responsibilities which are proper to them in the Church.

In this way the laity will be in the world like leaven in dough, working to improve the social, economic and political structures of society. They will willingly collaborate with all people of good will, irrespective of their religious affiliation, for the creation of a just order in society. And in the midst of the laity you have to stand, my beloved brothers, as servants and leaders: as servants who spend themselves without counting the cost, as leaders who form, inspire and guide the one People of God in the ways of the Lord. You must truly be builders of unity in a world threatened by division and violence.

4. The proclamation of the word of God and the various forms of priestly leadership find their culmination in the Eucharist, for the Eucharist is " the source and summit of the whole work of evangelization" . It is in the prayerful celebration of the Sacred Liturgy that you most fully collaborate in the work of sanctification. No other task that you perform will contribute as much to the building of community. The best service you can ever offer to the Church as a priest is to make the Eucharist Sacrifice the centre of your own life and the centre of the lives of the people you serve.

The identity of the priest, then, is always linked with the Eucharist. At the same time, a priest serves the Church in an irreplaceable way when he faithfully fulfils the ministry of reconciliation as exercised especially in the Sacrament of Penance. Only the ordained priest can forgive sins in the name of Jesus Christ. Acting in the "person of Christ", you help sinners to experience the personal love of the Most Holy Trinity. You have the joy of seeing God's mercy bring forth new life and hope in the hearts of the faithful.

The Church has entrusted the Sacraments to your care, and she asks you to administer them for the spiritual benefit of all God's people. How much do Christian hearts need and long for this, your unique and irreplaceable service!

5. An important teaching of the Second Vatican Council is the universal call to holiness. Everyone is called to love God with his whole heart and soul and to love his neighbour out of love for God. No one is excluded from the clarion call of Jesus: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" .

What a great need there is for priests to convince people that they all are called to holiness. And

how can they do this unless their own hearts are filled with the love of Christ? My brothers, you must be men of prayer, men who are close to God and who know how to live in his presence. At the same time, priestly holiness does not separate you from those you serve. While it is true that you are set apart for the Gospel of God, you are not separate from the rest of the faithful. Rather, as true brothers in Christ, familiar with the real life and circumstances of your people, especially the poor, you help them hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and you bring them life-giving grace through the Sacraments and God's word.

We must not forget that our ministry can succeed only if we undertake it as "God's fellow workers" , as "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" , by living and working in deep union with the one who is our very life, Christ Jesus our Lord. As priests, we are invited by the Father to abandon ourselves into his hands and to trust him with the confidence of a child, putting ourselves totally under the sway of his Spirit. He invites us to direct our entire priestly ministry to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity. This is the proven way to fruitfulness in the priestly ministry.

Listen again to the words of Jesus to his first disciples: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" . What rich overtones and what deep demands do these words not contain for you, priests of India! The people of this great land of gurus and sages are a people who, being deeply religious, go on seeking gurus who are truly men of God, men plunged in God, men who radiate the God-experience they have had. More than men of work they need men of prayer. How eager, therefore, must you be to drink from this fountain of life, which is Jesus himself!

6. My brother priests, need I remind you that you should be men of the Church? Listen to what Saint Paul says: "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" . Follow the example of our great High Priest. Love the Church and prayerfully reflect on her nature as the Body of Christ on earth and as the Sacrament of salvation.

Love the Church, too, when you notice her weaknesses, and work earnestly for her authentic renewal according to the Gospel. Remember that each one of us with his own personal failings is part of this Church ever in need of renewal. Each of us by his personal failings somehow contributes to the disfigurement of the face of the Church. All reform must begin with a change of our own hearts.

To be men of our Church means to serve her with unswerving loyalty. It means to serve her with a heart that does not flinch even when you have to suffer for her sake. It means to live in true and deep communion with the Bishop of Rome and with your own bishops and brother priests, serving the Church in unison as teachers of the same faith, as shepherds of the one flock as leaders of the Christian community.

7. Before concluding, my dear brothers, I want to speak to you of two pastoral concerns which are very dear to my heart and of great importance in the Church today: namely solidarity with the poor and fraternal interest in youth.

In recent years, the Church has become more and more aware of the Lord's invitation to care for the poor. The Sacred Scriptures clearly manifest God's special love for the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the destitute. And as Jesus began his ministry, he made his own the words of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed". Christ confirmed these words by his entire life lived in solidarity with the poor, in active concern for all those in need. As Saint Paul said: "Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich". You, my brother priests, have been anointed for this same ministry.

It is important to realise that for the priest's love for the poor to be authentic it must spring from a deep experience of God. It begins with a life style of simplicity and humble service to all, including those who are not poor. And it is meant to lead to the building up of a new world, a new human community where brother does not exploit brother but where hearts are united in peace.

Secondly, I urge you to make young people an important part of your pastoral care. By being open to them and truly interested in them, draw them into conversation about human life and lead them to the dialogue of salvation in Christ. By your example show them that Christ loves them and asks their love in return. Encourage youth to consider prayerfully their particular vocation in the Church. And may the Lord of the harvest bless us abundantly with religious and priestly vocations.

My beloved brother priests, I am grateful for this opportunity to speak to you about our priestly ministry. Know that I pray for you every day and I ask you to pray for me and for the Church throughout the world. I entrust you to the loving intercession of Mary, Mother of priests. With deep affection in the Lord, I bless you, and ask you to continue ever more generously your priestly service of giving Jesus to India.

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