



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 9 December 1988

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. We are coming to the end of the 1988 *ad Limina* visits, and I am happy that I can mark this occasion with such a large group of American bishops. To all of you who make up the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Chicago, Indianapolis and Milwaukee I extend a welcome of fraternal love.

During this year I have spoken to your brothers Bishops on a variety of topics, but always endeavoring to emphasize that the Church in the United States is called to holiness through a life of faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God and Savior of the world. This emphasis is the consequence of a profound conviction that only through living faith can the Church give a valid pastoral response to all the situations in which she finds herself in the modern world.

In my first talk of the present *ad Limina* series I stressed that the Church in the United States "belongs to Jesus Christ by right. He loves her intensely and intends to possess her more fully and to purify her ever more deeply in every aspect of her ecclesial reality". And today I would suggest that together we turn our thoughts and hearts once more to Jesus Christ, so that in him we can better understand this ecclesial reality. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who inspires and perfects our faith". And because "he has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God", it is by looking to Christ in the reality of his heavenly Kingdom that we will understand his Church on earth.

2. Since the Church is already the Kingdom of God in its initial stage, it is fitting, at the conclusion

of the *ad Limina* visits, that our attention should be directed to the final consummation of the Church. Her eschatological nature is an essential part of her mystery, and it is of great importance for our pastoral leadership in the Church.

We have been placed by the Holy Spirit as Pastors to guide the Church in accomplishing her mission. To do so adequately, we must always keep in mind that there is a specific dynamic at work at the center of the Church's evangelizing activities. It is her eschatological dimension. Everything that brings about her final fulfillment promotes her vitality. But if eschatology were to remain devoid of consequences, the Church's progress would be halted and her course misdirected. In this case, her activities would be irrelevant to authentic evangelization.

Ecclesial communion too is profoundly eschatological. Founded on communion through Christ with the Father in the Holy Spirit, the Church knows she is imbued with a life that transcends death. Her life is the life of the Risen Christ, the life that through the Cross conquered death by the power of loving obedience to the Father's will. By the exercise of his saving power, Christ communicates his own glorious life to the Church. The Church begins to exist as a consequence of this act of the Risen Jesus. She already lives this life of her Lord and Savior while longing for her definitive fulfillment.

3. By his life-giving act the Lord brings his Church into union with himself and thus fills her with holiness. But this holiness must be sustained and increased. In all the dimensions of their human existence the members of the Church must open themselves ever more to the Lord's sanctifying power. In this way, the Kingdom gradually takes shape in each Christian and in the Church, and grows indefinitely.

It is precisely in holiness that the Church anticipates and actually inaugurates the Kingdom of God. The pastoral office in the Church exists to foster holiness. To understand fully the pastoral office we must look to the holiness of the Church in her eschatological form: the holiness that Christ wills for his Church, the holiness that consummates the union of Christ and his Bride in heaven. In presenting an American Bishop to the whole world as a model of pastoral charity, Paul VI called the canonization of John Neumann both a "celebration of holiness" and a "prophetic anticipation... for the United States... of a renewal in love".

The full coming of Christ's Kingdom requires from all the faithful the gift of themselves to God and to others. Inseparable from this gift is prayer. We see this in Christ Jesus. Our Lord goes to the Cross in the very context of that prayer which he began in Gethsemane and which was consummated when he gave up his spirit into the hands of the Father. By virtue of our divine filiation we are called to follow in this path. Authentic prayer is possible only when we are ready to carry out the saving plan of the Father. We must try, therefore, to help God's people achieve a clear understanding of what prayer means: dialogue with God involving personal commitment. As Pastors, we ourselves must bear witness to prayer, being convinced that through it the saving

power of God transforms the ecclesial community.

4. The Church proclaims that her members are to be “children of the resurrection”, and she waits “in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ” She looks forward to the hour when her glory will be revealed in the fullness of communion with the Most Holy Trinity. It is Christ’s coming that in turn will definitively “new heavens and a new earth” As we await these realities we are called to live in deep peace and serenity. Victory is certain, evil will not prevail: Jesus Christ has overcome the world.

For this reason, Christians must seek to use temporal goods without the anxiety and hyperactivity of those whose only hope is in this life. Certainly faith does not permit us to remain passive in the face of suffering and injustice. Our hope spurs us on to work actively for the coming of the universal Kingdom of God. But we can never do this with the uncertainty of those who place their ultimate happiness in earthly history. A Christian’s struggle breathes serenity and communicates peace, not only as the goal it seeks but as the very style with which it promotes justice. A basic security and optimism inspires the whole life of the Church. We know beforehand the goal to which we aspire with God’s help. We may experience hesitation with regard to certain means, but the objective is clear and unchanging. In its light we can discern the path to be followed and we correct any course that may have been taken by mistake. The Church can never succumb to the temptation to “remake” herself. Her essential identity is guaranteed by the assurance that Jesus Christ will return in glory.

5. This expectation of Christ’s return in glory gives meaning to all the Church’s activities and places all temporal concerns in proper perspective. In all she does, the Church looks to a horizon far beyond human history, where everything will be subjected to Christ and by him offered to the Father. At the moment foreordained, everything in heaven and on earth will definitively be placed under the headship of Christ. Meanwhile, by God’s design, the life of the Church is interwoven in the fabric of human history but always directed to eternal life.

The Church can never be a community at the service of merely temporal objectives. Her end is the Kingdom of God, which she must unceasingly extend until its completion in eternity. Hence her initiatives and efforts cannot be motivated by merely temporal values. The Church lives in the midst of human beings – she herself being the new humanity in Christ – and she shares the experience of the whole human family. She lives in solidarity with all people, and nothing human is foreign to her.

The concerns of the ecclesial community embrace those of the civil community in such areas as peace, culture, the family and human rights. Yet the perspective from which the Church approaches all these issues has as its characteristic originality a relationship with the Kingdom of God. If the Church were to lose this transcendent perspective, she could not make her distinctive contribution to humanity.

6. Any consideration of the eschatological dimension of the Church must necessarily include the Holy Eucharist. The Church constantly finds her nourishment in the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of the glorified Christ. At the end of time, the saving power of the Eucharist will attain its full effect when the holiness of the Church will be complete and the entire universe will be perfectly restored in Christ. Meanwhile, we “proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes”.

The renewal of the Sacrifice of Christ on Calvary is at the same time the banquet of the Kingdom. As such it is the object of the Church’s profound solitudine and of her legislation. Recently, there was a clarification of the supplementary character of the faculty granted to lay persons to distribute Holy Communion as extraordinary Eucharistic ministers. The conditions established in the Code of Canon Law were authentically interpreted last year, at which time I directed the Congregation for the Sacraments to communicate the decision to the Episcopal Conferences throughout the world. In some cases there may still be a need to revise diocesan policies in this matter, not only to ensure the faithful application of the law but also to foster the true notion and genuine character of the participation of the laity in the life and mission of the Church.

As we prepare for the Jubilee of the year 2000, let us place the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist at the center of pastoral renewal. This is in accord with the consistent teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which sees the Eucharist as the culmination of the proclamation of the word and the call to Penance. The Christ who calls us to the Eucharistic banquet is the same merciful Christ who calls us to conversion. It is my earnest hope that in every diocese of the United States, under the pastoral leadership of the Bishops, there will be effective plans for the genuine renewal of the Sacrament of Penance, with the promotion of individual Confession. The Church is convinced and proclaims that the implementation of “aggiornamento” as envisioned by the Second Vatican Council is closely linked to the renewal of the Sacrament of Penance. Individual conversion is at the heart of all reform and renewal.

7. Mary the Mother of Jesus is the perfect realization of the Church’s life of faith and goal of holiness. In her we have a great sign that sums up and completely expresses the holiness that we sinners strive to attain through conversion. She who is now body and soul in heaven is the first of the redeemed and the totally sanctified one.

In the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, the Council presents a synthesis, applicable to Mary, of living in the temporal order without ever losing sight of the spiritual order in its eschatological fullness. The Council says that “while leading the life common to all here on earth, one filled with family concerns and labors, she was always intimately united with her Son and in an entirely unique way cooperated in the work of the Savior”. In her femininity as Virgin, Wife and Mother, Mary stands in and before the Church as the Woman of all salvation history. Having now been assumed into heaven, she lives her spiritual motherhood interceding on our behalf, helping us in the midst of our earthly pilgrimage not to forget the goal which inspires all the Church’s activities.

8. It is our role as Bishops to offer to the Father, in union with Christ the High Priest, the Church and all her activities. We offer her as Christ desires her to be: his Body and his Spouse, the Church of his divinity and his humanity, the Church that reflects his generosity and lives his Sacrifice, the Church of truth and merciful love, the Church of prayer and service, the Church of conversion, holiness and eternal life.

The Church that we offer to the Father and work daily to build up in charity is by no means a so-called “monolithic structure”, but rather the apostolic structure of unassailable unity, in which, as Bishops, all of us are called, in the expression of Saint Paul, to “be united in the same mind and in the same purpose”. Strengthened by this unity, our ministry becomes ever more effective in all its dimensions.

The present hour in the life of the Church calls for great hope, based on the eschatological promises of God and expressed in renewed confidence in the power of Christ’s Paschal Mystery. This is the hour for renewed effort in inviting young people to the priesthood and religious life, the hour for renewed serenity in proclaiming the most difficult demands of Christianity and the loftiest challenges of the Cross. It is the hour for a new commitment to holiness on the part of the Church, as she prepares for the great Jubilee of the year 2000 and invokes the coming of the Lord Jesus.

As we conclude this series of *ad Limina* visits, in continuity with those of 1978 and 1983 and with my two pastoral visits to the United States, I wish to renew my deep gratitude to all of you, my brothers Bishops, for your partnership in the Gospel. In this same spirit I look forward to the special meeting of Bishops planned for next year, so that by continued pastoral collaboration we may assist the Church in the United States to live her vocation of holiness through a life of dynamic faith. Meanwhile, I entrust to Mary, Mother of the Church and Queen of Heaven, the beloved faithful of your land and bless them all in the name of the Lord Jesus.

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