



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF AUSTRALIA
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA» VISIT**

Thursday, 13 October 1988

Dear brother Bishops,

1. As pastors of God's people in Australia, you have come to Rome to pray at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul and to visit the Successor of Saint Peter, so that the Church's unity and the bonds of faith, hope and charity may be strengthened. On my part, I welcome you with affection in the Lord Jesus Christ. I wish to express my gratitude, esteem and encouragement for your apostolic labours, and to assure you of my fraternal love and prayers. This is also an opportunity for me to acknowledge the faithful witness to the Gospel which is given by the Catholic people in each of your Dioceses.

As Australia celebrates its Bicentenary, we may recall with gratitude the deep faith and missionary spirit of those who brought the Word of God to your shores. They did so in obedience to the command which the Apostles received from Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you".

2. As the successors of the Apostles, you exercise that preaching and teaching mission in Australia today on the solid foundation laid by those who have gone before you. The Second Vatican Council says that Bishops are heralds of the faith, authentic teachers endowed with the authority of Christ. They preach a faith that is meant to inform the thinking, and to direct the conduct, of the people entrusted to their pastoral care. Through the light of the Holy Spirit, Bishops make the faith shine forth and bear fruit. By their vigilance they ward off whatever errors threaten their flock. For each of us this means a direct and personal involvement in proclaiming the Gospel, as men whom God has appointed to exercise the role of Christ the Teacher, Priest and Prophet. Though we realize our unworthiness for so great a task, we also recognize the power of God's word over people's hearts and minds despite the human weakness of its messengers. We are

constantly challenged by our teaching mission to purify our hearts, to grow in love for the things of God, and to deepen our faith in what is unseen.

And what is the goal of our preaching and teaching? With Saint Paul we can say: “My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you”. Is this not our fundamental goal: that through our labours Christ may be formed in every member of God’s People? This ministry is a travail, because we preach the prophetic message of a crucified Lord, and we are constantly calling people to a change of heart. It is also a travail because of the anxiety we feel for the flock entrusted to us. In the end, it is an act of love on our part, because the good shepherd willingly lays down his life for the sheep rather than flee from the wolf that would snatch and scatter them. By giving ourselves to this ministry with zeal and courage, we will find joy and the peace that comes from having “fought the good fight”, for having “finished the race”, for having “kept the faith”.

3. At the same time we know that we are not alone in fulfilling the Church’s teaching ministry. Although the office of preaching the Gospel to the whole Church has been entrusted principally to the Roman Pontiff and to the College of Bishops, each Bishop is also a “moderator of the entire ministry of the word” in his Diocese, a ministry that requires the active engagement of others. As Saint Paul writes: “(Christ’s) gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”. The whole People of God share in various ways in the Church’s teaching office. This is especially true of priests, our “brothers and friends”, who are “indispensable helpers and advisers” to us in teaching, sanctifying and shepherding God’s flock. It is true of deacons. It is also true of religious men and women, who by virtue of their consecration bear special witness to the radical demands of the Gospel. And it is true of the laity, who by Baptism and Confirmation are called to build up the one body of Christ and to transform the world from within.

There is thus a diversity of ministry, but a unity of mission in the Church. It is important that all of Christ’s faithful within the local Church should bear united witness to Christ and to the Gospel in communion with their Bishop. This applies in a particular way to priests, and to the unity and solidarity they should have with their Bishop and with one another. By building up a spirit of cooperation and by avoiding every harmful division, priests enter into the mind and heart of Christ the Teacher, who prayed to the Father that his disciples might “all be one... so that the world may believe”.

4. This leads us to another essential point concerning the teaching ministry; namely, that by her very nature the Church is a missionary Church. The preaching and teaching that form the People of God also prepare them to bring the Good News of salvation to others in a way that illumines all of human life with the light of the Gospel. In the words of the Council: “The Church... moves

forward together with all of humanity and shares the same earthly lot with the world; she is like a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God”.

5. Every believer needs to be instructed and trained in some measure for this mission, or to put it more accurately, every believer needs to be “formed” in Christian living in keeping with his or her state in life. For a person to be a Catholic by Baptism is only the beginning. That faith must be lived with perseverance; knowledge of it must be deepened; practice of it must be applied to personal choices and action; adherence to the faith must create the desire to share it with others and to transform the world in accordance with the Gospel. It is essential that Catholics have factual knowledge about the Church’s doctrine and discipline, but as Christ tells us, upon hearing the word, they must also hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience.

Much emphasis is rightly given today to the task of forming the clergy, religious and laity for fulfilling the duties of their state in life and for participating in the Church’s mission in the world. I know that in Australia you have worked diligently to promote both the letter and the spirit of the formation described in various Church documents and in the Code of Canon Law. Every effort at Christian formation must be marked by a deep love for Christ and the Church. As the Apostolic Exhortation “[Evangelii Nuntiandi](#)” tells us, the Lord expects a special kind of love not only from pastors, but “from every preacher of the Gospel, from every builder of the Church”. A sign of this love is “the concern to give the truth to people and to bring them into unity”. Another sign is “devotion to the proclamation of Jesus Christ, without reservation or turning back”. Further signs of this love include “respect for the religious and spiritual situation” of others; a “concern not to wound” those who are weak in faith; and finally “the effort to transmit to Christians, not doubts and uncertainties born of an erudition poorly assimilated, but certainties that are solid because they are anchored in the Word of God”.

6. The practice of this love applies to the whole range of activities that constitute the ministry of the word. These include preaching and catechetical instruction, which hold pride of place. There is the doctrinal formation given in schools and universities, and in conferences and meetings of every kind. There are the public statements which the Church employs to comment on current events, as well as the press and the other means of social communication.

Special mention must be made of the formation which young people receive in Catholic schools and in catechetical programmes. Young people are searching for faith and for ideals by which they can live. In their desire to test the authority of their elders they are quick to perceive any discrepancy between word and deed. For these reasons, the Church is justifiably concerned that teachers be outstanding not only for their teaching ability, but also for Christian doctrine and for Christian living. Perhaps more than in any other area of formation, the words of my predecessor Paul VI apply: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does

listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses". If teachers are at peace with their Catholic faith, this will be communicated to their students to the great good of the Church. If they are not, this too will leave its mark. I know that you are seeking ways to provide for the formation and pastoral care of teachers so that they will have the resources and encouragement they need to bear faithful witness to their Catholic faith before their students. In the face of increasing enrolment and fewer religious vocations, Catholic education in Australia and elsewhere is more and more the work of lay people. I wish to commend the many Catholic school teachers in your country for whom their work is truly an apostolate, and I encourage all the Bishops to continue their efforts to promote the Christian formation of students and teachers alike.

7. Another field of endeavour for the ministry of the word is social communications, especially the Catholic press. The media not only serve the Catholic community, but also help to form public opinion at large with regard to the Church and its teaching. A Catholic press that is strongly committed to promoting the faith can render an invaluable service. It does so by providing accurate information, airing informed opinion, and fostering dialogue with fidelity to what the Church believes and teaches. Catholics have right to expect such a commitment on the part of Catholic social communications. For your part, you will want to do everything possible not only to ensure that the integrity of faith and morale is safeguarded, but also that the faith of Catholics is deepened and made known in the wider community through the Catholic media. As sharers in the ministry of the word, those involved in social communications also have a right to the formation and pastoral care needed to help them fulfil their responsibilities with fidelity to the Church.

Dear brothers, as "moderators" of the entire ministry of the word in your Dioceses, you are constantly seeking ways to promote and encourage sound teaching and Christian formation. In giving yourselves to this task with zeal and vigilance, you can be confident that the Holy Spirit is perennially guiding and consecrating the Church in the truth, so that she can fulfil her teaching office. May you and the members of your local Churches always experience an abundance of the Spirit's gifts in order to build up the body of Christ and transform the world according to the Gospel. To each of you I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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