



The Holy See

Dear Brothers Bishops,

1. It is with great joy and with affection in the Lord that I welcome the members of the Antilles Episcopal Conference on the occasion of your ad Limina visit. Through you I extend my heartfelt greetings to all the clergy, religious and laity of the Antilles. Since our last meeting, I have had the pleasure of adding Trinidad and Tobago in 1985 and Santa Lucia in 1986 to the countries I have visited in your region. I now eagerly look forward to being in Curaçao, and to the day when I will be able to make still further visits in response to the kind invitations that I have received. My special welcome goes to Bishop Rivas from the new Diocese of Kingstown, which only recently took its place among the local Churches represented in your Conference.

The Second Vatican Council tells us that the Church born at Pentecost " speaks every language, understands and embraces all tongues in charity, and thus overcomes the dispersion of Babel " . This is reflected in a very striking way in the cooperation and harmony of your Episcopal Conference, which encompasses many territories with a diversity of races, languages, and cultures. It is fitting that you should give this example of ecclesial solidarity, which can serve as an encouragement to the peoples of the Antilles to work together on other levels too whether political, social or economic for the good of all. Your current visit happily coincides with the fifteenth anniversary of the definitive approval of your Conference's Statutes, granted some years after its establishment as one of the first International Conferences of this kind. I am confident that it will continue to be an effective instrument for pastoral planning and action in the years to come.

2. Dear Brothers, in the Gospel we find parables that compare God's action in the world to the working of nature. His kingdom is like a seed planted in the ground. If properly nurtured and cared for, it yields a rich harvest; if neglected or trampled on, it fails to bear fruit. This law of life and growth applies to the whole Body of Christ and to each of its members. The working of the Holy Spirit in our midst is powerful, but it unfolds with the cooperation of human beings who, like Mary at the Annunciation, consent to be servants of God's saving action. Assisted by the Spirit, Christians engage in a constant struggle to turn away from sin and believe in the Gospel, to grow in holiness by an ever more perfect gift of self, to live in faith, hope and love as signs of salvation for others. The good seed is known by fruits that are patiently cultivated and harvested over a lifetime.

As Christ's Bride, the Church gives spiritual birth to God's people through the power of the Holy Spirit. She nourishes her sons and daughters with the sacraments and preaches the word of Truth so that they may truly be free. She is always seeking to deepen and strengthen the gift of faith

which they have received, so that they may transform the world through Christian living.

You can be justifiably proud today of the way in which the " good seed " of the Gospel is bearing fruit in the Antilles, thanks to the pastoral charity of the clergy, the apostolic witness of men and women religious, and the dedicated commitment of the laity. You are seeking ways to ensure that this faith grows deeper and stronger for the Church's life and mission. I am pleased to note the Regional Assembly on the mission of the laity which will be held this summer, and the pastoral plan of evangelization adopted by the Archdiocese of Castries for the 1990s. I am confident that this effort, as well as the synods which have been held in the Dioceses of Belize City-Belmopan, Saint John's-Basseterre, and Basse-Terre et Pointe-à-Pitre will assist greatly in eliciting a renewal of faith and mission within your local Churches. Nor can I fail to mention in this regard the various diocesan assemblies that have been held elsewhere in the Antilles.

3. How does one prepare God's people to live a Christian life and to evangelize? In taking up their Christian duties in the world, people need to grasp the contents of that faith. In the words of Saint Peter, they must " be able to make a defence to any one who calls them to account for the hope that is in them ". This is essential at a time when various sects, sometimes using unworthy means, are disturbing Catholics in their beliefs, especially when their instruction in the faith is limited. Sound formation, imparted with trust in divine grace and with fidelity to Christ and the Gospel, ensures that the Church's faith will be safeguarded, strengthened and extended.

Some aspects of this formation deserve special mention. For example, great importance must be attached to the mystery of ecclesial communion in and through the Diocesan Bishop and with the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of Peter. Only within the perspective of *communio* can the authentic goals of Christian ecumenism and dialogue with people of other religions be properly understood and pursued with honesty and seriousness, avoiding gestures that fail to address real differences. Nor may we forget the role of the Church's social teaching in the formation process. As the peoples of the Antilles seek a more just and peaceful society, Catholics can turn to a body of teaching which offers an inspiring and challenging vision of authentic human development, of the value of work, and of the dignity and rights of every person.

Formation in the faith must be rooted in personal prayer and in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, " the source and summit of all Christian life ". Without this wellspring, spiritual growth is stunted and fails to flower in holiness as it should. For the Eucharist to be received worthily, attention must be given to the Sacrament of Penance. Catechesis on the intimate relationship of these two sacraments is properly given when in childhood First Confession precedes First Communion. The reluctance people sometimes feel to confess their sins poses a special challenge for the renewal of this sacrament in our day, but it is a challenge that the Church cannot ignore if she wishes her members to be reconciled with God in the way which Christ has established as a great gift and sacred trust: " Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained ".

Marriage and family life are also a concern of yours which I share, especially with regard to non-sacramental unions among some of your faithful. If the grace of the sacrament is lacking, then the " domestic Church " of the family is not established as it should be. The union of husband and wife " in the Lord " establishes a home in which the fundamentals of Christian living can be fully lived

and shared. It is within this " cradle " of human life and love that people learn the true meaning of freedom and responsibility, and are thus prepared to hear and to embrace God's call to serve others through a particular vocation. I urge you to continue challenging your people to live in accordance with Christian teaching about these most fundamental of human relationships. I also offer you every encouragement to establish programmes designed to strengthen marriage and the family in your Dioceses.

Like pastors everywhere, you are also concerned about the spiritual well-being of young people. They too must be awakened and prepared for an evangelizing mission in the Church and the world. In the Antilles there is a long tradition of Catholic education, which is widely respected and esteemed. May this tradition continue, so that new generations of Catholics will receive a solid foundation on which to build their lives in accordance with the Gospel. And may those outside the Catholic schools and universities likewise find ecclesial instruction and support for a life of Christian faith and virtue.

4. Knowledge of the faith, sacramental life, a sense of mission: these are fundamental aspects of the formation of the laity. But for these goals to be realized, attention must also be given to the number and quality of priests who " under the authority of the Bishop sanctify and govern that portion of the Lord's flock assigned to them " , and to the men and women religious who, through their special consecration, " strive for the perfection of charity in the service of God's Kingdom ". Priests and Religious not only remind the laity of their mission but also assist in their formation and encourage them in their role in the Church and the world.

The Church in the Antilles is very blessed to have had a long line of zealous priests and religious who have come as missionaries from other countries. Today, as the roots of the Church grow deeper, there are more and more vocations from among the sons and daughters of the local peoples, and for this we should be immensely grateful to God. We also pray that he will grant a still further increase, especially in vocations to the monastic life. At this time of transition both missionaries and native-born clergy and religious are important for the vitality of many of your Dioceses. Both groups contribute to the building up of that Church which " understands and embraces all tongues in charity " without distinction of nation, race or culture.

If the increase of vocations to the priesthood is to be truly fruitful for the Church, the seed of the divine call must be nurtured with great love and care. So crucial is priestly formation in our day that it has been chosen as the theme of the Synod of Bishops this coming October. Formation is first of all a work of the Holy Spirit, but it takes place within a human context which must be provided for with all wisdom and prudence. I ask you to continue your joint efforts to strengthen the formation programme at the Regional Major Seminary in Trinidad. The appointment of one of your own number, Bishop Mendes, as the new Rector is an impressive sign of your commitment to this urgent task, and I wish to offer him every encouragement in his work.

J'ai déjà parlé de l'importance de la communion ecclésiale. Les futurs prêtres, en particulier, ont besoin d'approfondir leur sens de la communio, entendue dans toutes ses dimensions, à la fois doctrinale et disciplinaire, grâce à une vie spirituelle de qualité et à des études sérieuses. Cela reste absolument essentiel pour affermir les autres dans la communion et vivre eux-mêmes, avec joie et fidélité, " l'obéissance et le respect " promis à l'Evêque lors de l'ordination; pour prêcher la

foi de l'Eglise, sans compromis ni altération, aux catholiques comme aux non-catholiques; pour célébrer les saints mystères suivant les normes liturgiques.

La sollicitude de l'Eglise pour la vie et le ministère des prêtres diocésains s'étend également aux religieux et aux religieuses, qui ont donné leur vie au Seigneur pour le service de l'Eglise par les vœux de chasteté, de pauvreté et d'obéissance. La fécondité spirituelle de leur témoignage est fonction de la fidélité avec laquelle ils observent les obligations de leur état, à la fois dans leur vie intérieure et dans l'expression extérieure indispensable de leur consécration et de leur identité.

Pour que les religieux de vos diocèses donnent le meilleur d'eux-mêmes dans le service ecclésial, vous aurez à cœur de les encourager et de les aider à vivre en parfaite harmonie avec leur vocation particulière et le charisme propre de chaque communauté. J'ai confiance que grandiront encore les bonnes relations que vous entretenez avec les différents Instituts religieux qui apportent une contribution si importante à la vie de vos Eglises particulières.

5. Chers Frères, comme l'enseigne le Seigneur lui-même, "le Royaume des cieux est comparable à un homme qui a semé du bon grain dans son champ". Malgré les épines, le sol pierreux et le soleil de plomb, l'Eglise nourrit la semence du Royaume pour que, par la puissance de l'Esprit Saint, elle produise du fruit à raison de trente, soixante et cent pour un. L'Evêque de Rome se sent proche de chacun d'entre vous dans l'accomplissement de votre mission, en union avec les prêtres, les religieux et les fidèles laïcs, pour le salut du monde. Que le Maître de la moisson soit avec vous! Qu'il guide vos pas et qu'il vous accorde ses dons de joie et de paix! A tous, je donne de grand cœur ma Bénédiction Apostolique.

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