



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF GREAT BRITAIN  
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

*Tuesday, 17 March 1992*

*Dear Brother Bishops,*

1. With immense joy I welcome you, members of *the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales*, the Pastors of the *Provinces of Westminster, Southwark and Birmingham*. One of the principal purposes of the quinquennial visits of the world's Bishops to this Apostolic See is to venerate the tombs of the Princes of the Apostles, Peter and Paul. In this sense the *ad Limina* visit is a spiritual pilgrimage to the origins of the Church in time, when her divine Founder entrusted the riches of his grace to the Apostles for "the nurturing and constant growth of the people of God" (*Lumen Gentium*, 18). Your presence is not merely the fulfilment of an administrative or juridical obligation of your Office, but a manifestation of genuine brotherhood and fellowship in the love of Christ, the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4) who continues to send his vicars and ambassadors, "so that as sharers in his power they might make all peoples his disciples, sanctifying and governing them" (*Lumen Gentium*, 19).

I greet each one of the Churches over which you preside in charity and service. With you I thank God for the faith and dedicated Christian life of your priests, religious and laity, for the union of all the faithful around their Pastors and with the Successor of Peter, the centre and visible foundation of the Church's indefectible unity. I warmly encourage you to continue to strengthen the *affectus collegialis* which should characterize all relations between Bishops, in your own Conference and towards your Brother Bishops around the world. In this way the Conference, without weakening the personal responsibility of each member, will enable you better to work together in facing the not indifferent challenges of the present moment of evangelization and mission.

2. Reflecting on our episcopal ministry as we approach the end of the Second Christian

Millennium, we realize how almost every question and every activity is closely connected with *the idea we have of the Church herself*. We are heirs of a long and fruitful development, in which the Church has acquired a deeper awareness of her own nature and encompassing mission (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). In his Encyclical "*Ecclesiam Suam*", Pope Paul VI indicated this awareness as the unifying theme of the immense work of study and reflection then being carried out by the Second Vatican Council: "the Church in this moment", he wrote, "must reflect on herself to find strength in the knowledge of her place in the divine plan; to find again greater light, new energy and fuller joy in the fulfilment of her own mission; and to determine the best means for making more immediate, more efficacious and more beneficial her contacts with mankind" (Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 1). We must indeed give thanks to God that, by the power of the Risen Lord, the Church in our time "is given strength... to show forth in the world the mystery of the Lord in a faithful though shadowed way, until at last it will be revealed in total splendour" (*Lumen Gentium*, 8).

So much attention to the mystery of the Church, prompted and guided by the Council, is in fact a great gift of God and has been the source of untold benefits for the world. Certainly, it has been a *rich source of spirituality and apostolic commitment* for millions of the faithful at every level of ecclesial life. The 1985 Extraordinary Session of the Synod of Bishops, twenty years afterwards, called the Council not only "a grace of God and a gift of the Holy Spirit", but also "a legitimate and valid expression and interpretation of the deposit of faith as it is found in Sacred Scripture and in the living tradition of the Church" (1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, *Final Report*, 1, 2). This is the clear truth and conviction which must characterize all teaching, all ministry and all pastoral activity. It is the truth on which the post-conciliar documents of the Papal Magisterium have all been based, fostering a renewal and adaptation that is not only useful and beneficial, but also one that strictly conforms to authentic Catholic doctrine and tradition. At the same time we must be sobered by the fact that the 1985 Extraordinary Session of the Synod, called to reflect on how the Church had moved to implement the Second Vatican Council, raised a voice of warning in this respect. The Bishops at the Synod acknowledged that a "partial reading of the Council" and "a unilateral presentation of the Church as a purely institutional structure devoid of her mystery" have led to serious deficiencies, not least among the young, who "critically consider the Church a pure institution" (*Ibid.*).

3. We must surely see that one of the pressing tasks of the Magisterium, and of your own concrete pastoral ministry, is to ensure that *a genuine Catholic ecclesiology* is presented at every level of the Church's teaching, and that diocesan and parochial structures and activities, as well as the various associations and movements, are all imbued with a true sense of what the Church really is. In your particular Churches there has been a significant development of Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils, and some have had Diocesan Assemblies or Synods. At the national level, the National Conference of priests, the Conference of Major Religious Superiors, the Catholic Union and other bodies allow for a high degree of consultation and cooperation in the life and mission of the Church. The National Board of Catholic Women can be of particular help at this time when the

role of women in society and in the Church is undergoing such a radical questioning and transformation. It is essential that all these structures and their activities be inspired by genuine love for the Church, with a sense of belonging to her mystery and to her transcendent destiny.

It is painful to see that energies which should be used for the building up of the Body of Christ sometimes produce an opposite effect, due to a faulty ecclesiology which fails to take account of the supernatural nature of the Church's mission and of the means with which Christ has endowed her for its realization. Pastors should feel a responsibility to address this question, and all that it implies, fully trusting that only an authentic reading of the Council offers the inspiration and enlightenment needed for that renewal of the Church which was a principal reason for the Council's convocation in the first place, a renewal which is still in the process of being achieved.

4. Only an ecclesial life firmly based on *the truths of the faith* can help the members of the Church to remain faithful to Christ and to grasp the implications of the Gospel message in relation to everyday cultural, political and economic choices. In a very secularized society, there is a temptation to preach "values" on which a majority can agree, thus veiling to some degree the true nature of the Gospel as "the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). The Church in England and Wales is blessed with a vast network of Catholic schools and colleges, of Catholic publications, of programmes for the religious education of adults, such as the Maryvale Institute in Birmingham, or the Catholic Enquiry Centre for those interested in the faith, to mention only these. This "world" of teaching the faith calls for your personal and dedicated pastoral guidance.

Bishops have a responsibility to see that in preaching and catechesis, in religious instruction and theological studies, as well as in Catholic publications, the mystery of the Church is presented in a complete way, as a mystery of truth and grace, at once human and divine (*Lumen Gentium*, 8), having the Holy Spirit as its principle of life (*Ibid.*, 7). At this point in time a great effort is required to reaffirm the truths of the faith, to arouse the supernatural sense of the faith, by which God's people "clings without fail to the faith once delivered to the saints, penetrates it more deeply by accurate insights and applies it more thoroughly to life" (*Lumen Gentium*, 12). No one should be surprised that Bishops correct whatever does not correspond to authentic Church teaching or that they challenge the Church's members to loyal obedience. Bishops themselves are the first to owe obedience to the Holy Spirit and faithfulness to the deposit of faith.

5. It sometimes happens in your ministry that you meet resistance to legitimate and authorized changes, or systematic criticism of them. Such an attitude can reflect a lack of understanding of the dynamic nature of the Church's role and mission in the world, as it is evident, for example, in the Acts of the Apostles, where the early Church's adaptation to changing circumstances is amply demonstrated. At the same time, many discerning Catholics are disturbed and even scandalized when in their communities they perceive a "failure to distinguish correctly between a legitimate openness... to the world and the acceptance of a secularized world's mentality and order of values" (1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, *Final Report*, 1, 4). It goes without saying that it

falls to the Bishops in the first place to "test everything" and to "hold fast what is good" (Cf. 1 Thess. 5:21), mindful of Saint Paul's injunction to "preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2). In this respect I wish to encourage you in the difficult but necessary task which is yours, that of providing effective leadership in order to ensure that the life of the communities entrusted to your pastoral care *stand firm in the genuine tradition* which has come down to us from the Apostles.

6. As teachers of the faith you have many times spoken out on issues affecting the life of your society. The guidance you have given for example in *the defence of life and in areas of social justice*, unemployment, housing, race relations and the plight of refugees, has been a stimulus for many to become more active in the public debate of such questions and in efforts to meet the many and varied needs found in a developed society such as your own. It is impossible to mention all the excellent initiatives which have arisen and which receive your support. I am thinking in particular of the many Pro-Life activities in which Catholics, Christians of other denominations, and others of no particular religious allegiance, share a common conviction regarding the inviolable value of human life from the moment of conception to natural death. I could mention the celebration last year in Liverpool of a National Convention to mark the centenary of "[Rerum Novarum](#)", and the presentation made by the Catholic Media Office of the Encyclical "[Centesimus Annus](#)", as instances which enabled many people to acquire a renewed awareness of how the Church's social teaching applies to the real problems of society. The *Report on Homelessness* by your Conference's Department for Citizenship and Social Responsibility is an example in point. Some areas will continue to call for particularly careful guidance because the difficulties to be found in them are very great: the defence of life, the family, and respect for moral and ethical principles in the application of scientific and technological advances, as well as in the political choices, which determine whether or not socio-economic life effectively serves the well-being of individuals and of the community.

7. There is one further aspect of your ministry to which I would briefly refer. It is *the important question of ecumenism* and the need to place the difficulties encountered along the path to Christian unity within the general context of changed and much improved ecumenical relations. A number of recent events, including the publication of the *Official response to the ARCIC I Final Report*, have shown that it is possible to go to the heart of the serious differences between divided Christians and still persevere in a fraternal and progressive dialogue. The significance of the Response lies not only in its furtherance of the *theological dialogue*, important though this is, but especially in the fact that the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion are speaking to each other at the level of what may be called a truly *ecclesial dialogue*. It is precisely at this level that, eventually and with God's grace, substantial moves towards unity of faith and visible ecclesial unity will take place. The question of "ecumenical method" should also be seen in this light. I look forward to the forthcoming visit of His Grace Archbishop Carey as an opportunity to discuss together the course which future discussion on ecumenical relations with the Anglican Communion might take.

Ecumenism of course is not solely a matter for the highest Church authorities. It also involves a *dialogue of life* at the level of exchanges and cooperation between believers at every level. It is heartening to know that such organizations as *Churches Together* in England, *CYTUN* in Wales and the *Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland* are producing good results. May God continue to inspire all Christians in England and Wales with sentiments of evangelical love, mutual trust and respect for one another, for the sake of an ever more effective witness to God's word and service of Christ's saving mission.

8. Dear Brother Bishops, before concluding I wish to thank you very warmly for your fidelity to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and for your deep sense of communion with the universal Church. Ten years have passed since my memorable visit to your country. That time still stands out vividly in my mind. And I still receive many letters from Great Britain, recalling those days of prayerful meeting. Allow me today to repeat a thought I shared with you when we met in Westminster at Archbishop's House: "With our clergy, religious and laity, and united with one another, let us proclaim the saving and reconciling message of the Gospel, with a deep conviction that—like Jesus and with Jesus—we are not alone. In the collegiality of the Catholic Episcopate let us find renewed strength and vigour to lead God's people" (John Paul II, [\*Address at the Meeting with the Bishops of Great Britain\*](#), 11). May the Spirit confirm you in this consoling thought! With my Apostolic Blessing.

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