



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF IRELAND ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT

Friday, 25 September 1992

Your Eminence, dear brother Bishops!

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 1:2).

1. It is a great joy for me to receive you, the *Bishops of Ireland*, on the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit and to share with you this moment of fraternal and ecclesial communion. When the Bishops of a particular region or country come jointly to pray at the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles and to meet the Bishop of Rome, they give visible expression to the bonds of faith and love which unite the particular churches among themselves and with the Apostolic See. Your *ad Limina* visit is a concrete, tangible sign of *the collegial spirit which is "the soul of the collaboration between the Bishops on the regional, national and international levels"* (1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Finalis*, II, 4). I wish to encourage you to continue to work together in your Episcopal Conference, sharing the burdens of your office, supporting each other in fraternal friendship, and fostering that openness to the needs of the whole Church around the world for which the Church in Ireland is renowned. A well-organized and effective Conference ensures that your efforts, through a constant interchange of ideas and resources, are better coordinated and therefore more fruitful. It can be a magnificent instrument of evangelization, becoming a source of dynamism in meeting the challenges and demands of your ministry.

2. As *successors of the Apostles, vicars and ambassadors of Christ in your Dioceses* (Cf. Lumen Gentium, 27), you are conscious of your personal accountability before God himself. You have been called to be the vigilant watchmen, set to guard the Lord's house (Cf. Ez. 3:17). Christ has sent you to preach the word of life "in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2), never giving in to the false "wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age" (1 Cor. 2:6), especially when there is a

danger that some will "turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths" (2 Tim. 4:4). More than that, you are "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). Above all *you are the good shepherds who know your people (cf. Jn. 10:14), and who, in turn, are known by them:* that is, you strive to be deserving of the trust and religious obedience with which the community of the faithful listens when it perceives that the shepherd's voice is the voice of the Lord himself: "they know his voice... they do not know the voice of strangers" (*Ibid.*, 10:4-5).

From your reports and our conversations I have had a clear confirmation of *your deep love for the people of God whom you serve in the name of Jesus Christ*. Your particular Churches are abundantly blessed with priests, religious and lay men and women who not only live their faith with exemplary constancy but who also do remarkable work in every form of the apostolate and in service to the young, the sick, the elderly and those in any kind of spiritual and material need. For me to speak of your pastoral ministry is, first of all, to take into account and to give thanks to God for the many positive and fruitful aspects of Catholic life in your country. The thought of the dear Catholic people of Ireland brings to mind the sentiment expressed by Saint Paul: "I have great confidence in you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort" (2 Cor. 6:4).

3. Your *ad Limina* visit happily coincides with the *Beatification* of Archbishop Dermot O'Hurley, Francis Taylor, Margaret Ball and *their companion Martyrs*. Times have changed since that dark period in which the profession of faith often met with imprisonment, torture and death. But the essence of their witness, *their fidelity to Christ and to the Church*, is sublimely relevant today. The Martyrs challenge the faith which you and your people profess as heirs to the truths for which they gave their lives. They stimulate your fidelity to Christ, who is himself "the faithful witness" (Rev. 1:5). Their intercession and their heroic example serve as a point of reference for the commitment and dedication with which you personally are called to fulfil the episcopal ministry. The Beatification of the Martyrs reminds us all of "the one thing necessary" (Lk. 10:43), and is a source of encouragement to all those in Ireland whose generous and self-giving Christian life is a pledge of divine love and the best and most abiding guarantee of a society grounded in justice, truth and peace.

4. The demands upon your leadership increase with the growing complexity of modern life. Not only are there more opportunities to manifest the love of the Good Shepherd in concern for and solidarity with people in all kinds of need; there is also *the primary challenge to proclaim effectively the Gospel message of salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ to our contemporaries*, in what is sometimes called the "postmodern world".

The *new evangelization* which I have so often spoken of implies, on the one hand, *a renewed missionary zeal* to preach the word of God to those who have not yet heard it. Christ's "missionary mandate" is of permanent and universal validity, and I hope and pray that the present and future generations of Irish men and women will not abandon the missionary ideal which has been so characteristic of the Church in your country.

On the other hand, in traditionally Christian environments the new evangelization calls for *a better proclamation and catechesis*, capable of responding to the difficulties posed by a "culture" which gives precedence to the material and selfseeking aspects of life at the expense of the spiritual and altruistic. It is a "culture" which holds that religious truth should be confined to the realm of private opinion, in favour of a "neutrality" or "secularism" which, to say the least, is itself only a minority though strongly propagated view. In this perspective, the new evangelization cannot be directed merely to defending the Christian life bequeathed to us by previous generations. *The word of God must be announced with fresh vigour in every age*. What is needed is a more effective transmission of the Christian message by reasoned argument and by example; in other words, by means of a true and complete presentation of the faith, sustained by a convincing witness of holiness, justice and love. In this great task it is God certainly who gives the growth, but he relies on the apostles actively to plant and water (Cf. 1 Cor. 3:6). This *vigour in fulfilling the apostolic task* should be every Pastor's concern, the subject of his constant prayer and the urgent appeal he makes to the whole ecclesial community.

5. The Church in Ireland is rich in personnel, gifts and charisms. As a community of faith she is being challenged to respond to the demand for a more solid Christian culture. A *coordinated pastoral plan* can help to direct and focus efforts. A pastoral plan cannot take the place of personal commitment, but it can help to identify the areas needing specific pastoral attention: the family; the defence of human life; schools and universities; ethical standards in private and public life, and in the media of social communications; special categories in society. It can ensure a better use of spiritual and apostolic resources. It can release new energies, favour new initiatives, foster new approaches. It should give space and impulse to all those energies which the Holy Spirit raises up in and for the community, in particular through lay associations and movements or activities suited to the needs of young people. In Ireland such energies are not lacking, but they do need guidance, support and encouragement.

A pastoral plan should ensure that *good and effective catechesis is provided at every level*. Furthermore, the distinction between catechesis and generic religious instruction requires the careful training of teachers who not only have a profound grasp of the doctrine they are meant to transmit, and of the pedagogical and methodological skills they need, but who also possess human and Christian maturity, a deep understanding of people and of the cultural environment, and who share positively and joyfully in the life of the ecclesial community. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Catholic teachers of Ireland. Their commitment to handing on to children the precious gift of faith is an immense resource for the Church in your country. Catholic schools, with their ethos pervaded by spiritual and moral values, make an irreplaceable contribution to the well-being of society.

6. We are all aware that there is a tendency today to regard the Church as a purely institutional structure devoid of her mystery. For this reason I wrote in the recent Encyclical "[Redemptoris Missio](#)": "The temptation today is to reduce Christianity to merely human wisdom, a

pseudo-science of well-being. In our heavily secularized world a 'gradual secularization of salvation' has taken place, so that people strive for the good of man, but man who is truncated, reduced to his merely horizontal dimension" (John Paul II., *Redemptoris Missio*, 11). Bishops, in the first place, have a responsibility to show that the salvation brought by Jesus Christ embraces the whole person and is inseparable from the wondrous prospect of divine filiation (Cf. *Ibid.*). In this respect the Church in Ireland can sing a joyful hymn of gratitude to God for the holiness of life, the profound life of prayer, the solid sacramental practice, and the generous love and kindness of so many of her members. In many of your Dioceses there is an increase of Eucharistic adoration. The Eucharist, as the Council says, is the source and summit of all the Church's life (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11). A Eucharistic-centred spirituality helps us to be conscious of the perennial power of the Gospel, "the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16), which, unlike changeable and transitory ideologies, is capable always of inspiring new life and vigour in human hearts, in every historical circumstance.

7. As pastors of souls you are fully aware that the malaise of contemporary society revolves around *family life and family values*. On many occasions you have made individual or collective declarations on this point, often aimed at making the leaders in public life more aware of the fundamental importance of the family for the well-being of society. Where the family is weakened, society descends into confusion and conflict. Neither society nor the State can substitute for the family's educational and formative influence. To defend the family, that is, the institution based on human nature and on the deepest needs of the human person, as the "first and vital cell of society" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 11) and the bulwark of civilization, is an imperative task for society's political representatives. To do so is not, as some might say, to promote a "unilateral" Catholic position.

A similar consideration can be made about the grave matter of *abortion*. The Consistory held on 4–6 April 1991 on the subject of threats to human life called the entire universal Church to a courageous defence of life, one which would engage and challenge the consciences of all. At the same time it should be made clear that the argument against abortion is based not only on the data of faith but also on reasons of the natural order, including the true concepts of human rights and social justice. The *right to life* does not depend on a particular religious conviction. It is a primary, natural, inalienable right that springs from the very dignity of every human being. The defence of life from the moment of conception until natural death is the defence of the human person in the dignity that is his or hers from the sole fact of existence, independently of whether that existence is planned or welcomed by the persons who give rise to it. Every reflection on this serious matter must begin from the clear premise that *procured abortion is the taking of the life of an already existing human being*. To uphold this principle and to enshrine it democratically in the Constitution and laws of the State does not imply insensitivity to the rights of others, including mothers in complex and difficult situations. The life of the mother and the life of her unborn child are equally precious and equally to be defended. There can be no "right" to kill an already existing though yet unborn human being.

Likewise, there can be no justification from the moral point of view for disseminating information the purpose of which is to facilitate the killing of the unborn. In your recent "Statement on the Sacredness of Human Life" you have rightly urged the faithful to be supportive and understanding of women in distressful situations, and you have reaffirmed your pastoral commitment to providing all forms of assistance and care through Cura and similar organizations. In this way the ecclesial community effectively demonstrates the mercy of Christ and his healing.

8. Dear brother Bishops, so many other aspects of your ministry deserve consideration here. We have spoken of some of them in private, and you have also discussed them in your visits to the various Offices of the Holy See. There is one point however which I cannot leave untouched. I am certain that every day you give thanks to God *for the dedicated ministry and exemplary life of your priests*. They are men of faith and love, deeply aware that they "exist and act in order to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to build up the Church in the name and person of Christ the Head and Shepherd" (John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 15). It is their identification with the mystery of Christ and the Church which inspires the faithful with trust and confidence in their ministry. It is extremely important that they should always be close to the people of God whom they serve, especially the humble, the sick and the needy, and persons bereaved or distressed through violence.

Priests are not immune from the particular difficulties that a consumerist society places in the way of those seeking to live a life of holiness and self-giving. I am confident that a reflective reading of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "*Pastores Dabo Vobis*" will provide you and your priests with a stimulus to fostering that "continual conversion" which is the essence of fidelity and evangelical fruitfulness (Cf. *ibid.*, chap. VI). I take this opportunity to encourage you to continue to promote *an intensive pastoral programme of support for vocations to the priesthood and religious life*. In your openness to the needs of the universal Church I also ask you to give special care to missionary vocations, following Ireland's magnificent traditions. Your personal concern for vocations and for the formation of your seminarians is a basic task of your episcopal ministry, and I commend to your careful attention the Apostolic Visitation which, in line with similar procedures in other countries, the Congregation for Catholic Education is preparing for Ireland.

9. The situation in Northern Ireland continues to be of grave concern to you. As we hope and pray for political progress towards an end to violence, and encourage those who work for this aim, the Church's abiding effort must be to preach loudly the Gospel of reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:19) and to give close *attention to the pastoral problems and the living conditions* which make justice and peace difficult to attain. Your continuing efforts to promote good ecumenical relations between the Churches and communities throughout Ireland are an important contribution to the work of reconciliation and peace.

Jesus Christ tells us: "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one" (Rev. 1:17-18). It is this Jesus, *divine and incarnate*, whom the Church presents to humanity today as always. He is

the way for humanity (St. Augustine, *Tract. in Ioannem*, 34:9). He is the reason for our confidence, the source of our missionary and apostolic zeal, for "in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). Let us work earnestly for the "new Advent" (John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 1) which should mark the close of the Second Christian Millennium and the beginning of the next. That event, which acquires particular significance in the light of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, constitutes an "appointment" for the whole Church. *May the Church in Ireland celebrate that Jubilee with her faith intact and her love undiminished!* May Mary, Queen of Peace, guide you and the faithful priests, religious and laity of Ireland! May the Blessed Martyrs intercede for you! With my Apostolic Blessing.

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