



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Friday, 2 July 1993*

*Dear Brothers in Christ,*

1. It is a joy to welcome you – Pastors of the particular Churches in the *Provinces of Baltimore, Washington, Atlanta and Miami*. Gathered in the name of "Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith" (Eph. 3: 12), this meeting is meant *to manifest and strengthen the communion that binds us together in the grace of the Holy Spirit*, the living and enduring source of all the Church's life. Your "visit to Peter" (Cf. Gal. 1: 18) coincides with the Solemnity of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, founders of this "greatest and most ancient Church" (Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 3, 2). United in *giving testimony to their faith through a cruel martyrdom*, these glorious martyrs labored together for the sake of the Gospel. They exchanged the "right hand of fellowship" (*koinonia*) (Gal. 2: 9), recognizing that the Lord Jesus himself had made Peter the universal Shepherd of his flock (Cf. Jn. 21: 15-17) and the visible foundation of the Church's unity (Cf. Mt. 16: 18). In that same spirit of cooperation I share these reflections with you on some aspects of the care of God's beloved people.

It was thirty years ago, on the Feast of the Commemoration of Saint Paul, that my predecessor Pope Paul VI solemnly began his papal ministry. With full realization of the mission entrusted to him, Paul VI expressed on that occasion a commitment which I too fully endorse and for the fulfillment of which he has been a constant model and example: "*We will defend the Holy Church from errors in faith and morals which from within or without threaten her integrity and cloud her beauty; we will strive to maintain and increase the Church's pastoral vigor*" (Paul VI, *Homily*, 30 June 1963). Dear Brother Bishops, this is an objective which I know you too share. Herein we have a pastoral duty which belongs to the essential core of our ministry, and which imposes itself with evangelical urgency. As Pastors, we bear responsibility for "*rightly handling the word of truth*"

(2Tm. 2: 15), by proclaiming in a way that is clear and uncompromising, yet attractive and encouraging, "*the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ*" (2Cor. 4: 4). My reflections with the various groups of Bishops from the United States are inspired by concern for the fulfillment of this primordial task.

2. One of the strengths of the Church in the United States has always been *the role of the parish* as the focal point not only of sacramental life but also of Catholic formation and education, of charitable and social activity. The fragmentation which marks modern living has caused a certain weakening of the sense of belonging to the parish community, especially where there has been polarization around issues of doctrine or liturgy. A great effort is needed by priests and laity to renew parish life in the image of the Church herself, as *a communion benefitting from the complementary gifts and charisms of all her members*. Communion is a dynamic reality which implies a constant exchange of gifts and services between all the members of the people of God. The vitality of a parish depends on merging the diverse vocations and gifts of its members into a unity which manifests the communion of each one and of all together with God the Father through Christ, constantly renewed by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The point of departure is an awareness on the part of priests, laity and Religious that their gifts – hierarchical and charismatic (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 4) – are different though complementary; and that they are all necessary "for building up the body of Christ" (Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 17). In our conversations, some Bishops have mentioned that the emphasis on baptismal equality – a truth solidly rooted in the Church's tradition – sometimes leads to minimizing the real distinction between the royal priesthood of all believers and the ministerial priesthood conferred by sacramental ordination. It is necessary to insist on the fact that the difference "in essence" between them has nothing to do with "power" understood in terms of privilege or dominion. Both are derived from the one priesthood of Christ and they complement each other, ordered as they are to serving each other.

Authentic communion involves a mutual abiding in love (Cf. 1Jn. 4: 12-13) which ensures that *clergy and laity support each other with respect for the identity of each one*. What you refer to as "*collaborative ministry*", when completely faithful to the Church's sacramental doctrine, provides a sure foundation for building communities which are internally reconciled, and the spiritual energies of which are positively harnessed for the new evangelization (Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 3).

3. It is a blessing for the Church that in so many parishes the lay faithful assist priests in a variety of ways: in religious education, pastoral counseling, social service activities, administration, etc. This increased participation is undoubtedly *a work of the Spirit renewing the Church's vigor*. In some cases, where a temporary dearth of priests makes it necessary, members of the laity can be made responsible for administering a parish according to canonical norms (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 517, 2; cf. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 23). When such situations arise, Bishops have the

sensitive task of seeing that the faithful do not confuse these "ministerial" responsibilities with the specific *sacra potestas* proper to the ordained priesthood. It is not a wise pastoral strategy to adopt plans which would assume as normal, let alone desirable, that a parish community be without a priest pastor. To interpret the decreased number of active priests – a situation which we pray will soon pass – as a providential sign that lay persons are to replace priests is irreconcilable with the mind of Christ and of the Church. *The royal priesthood of the laity is never furthered by obscuring the ministerial priesthood of the ordained*, which makes priests not only celebrants of the Eucharist, but also spiritual fathers, guides and teachers of the faithful entrusted to them.

4. The development in the United States of what is commonly called "lay ministry" is certainly a positive and fruitful result of the renewal begun by the Second Vatican Council. Particular attention needs to be paid to the *spiritual and doctrinal formation of all lay ministers*. In every case they should be men and women of faith, exemplary in personal and family life, who lovingly embrace "the full and complete proclamation of the Good News" (John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 9) taught by the Church. Clear diocesan guidelines are needed for the initial and continuing formation of the lay people who are officially involved in parish and diocesan life. But guidelines need to be correctly implemented, and therein lies a challenge to your leadership.

As I said to you during my last [Pastoral Visit to the United States](#), a sound ecclesiology must take pains to avoid either "laicizing" the ordained priesthood or "clericalizing" the lay vocation (John Paul II, *Address to the representatives of the Catholic Lay People of America in San Francisco*, 5, 18 September 1987). The laity should be conscious of their own standing in the Church: not as mere recipients of doctrine and the grace of the sacraments, but as active and responsible agents of the Church's mission to evangelize and sanctify the world. It falls especially to the lay faithful to bring the truth of the Gospel to bear on the realities of social, economic, political and cultural life. *Theirs is the specific charge to sanctify the world from within* by engaging in secular work (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 31; John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 15). Their task is to order society to the fullness which dwells in Christ (Cf. Col. 1: 19), always in communion of faith and order with the Bishops who "preside in place of God over the flock... as teachers of doctrine, priests of sacred worship, and officers of good order" (*Lumen Gentium*, 20). Perhaps, as the Apostolic Exhortation "*Christifideles Laici*" points out, more attention should be given in catechesis and preaching to the "deep involvement and the full participation of the lay faithful in the affairs of the earth, the world and the human community" (John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 15), so that the laity may better understand that this is their primary apostolate within the Church. They need your constant encouragement. They expect their Bishops to *strengthen them in holiness and guide them with authentic teaching, while at the same time leaving them room for initiative and freedom of action in the world* (Cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 7).

5. A question closely connected with what we are saying here is that of *the role of women in the life of the Church*, a question which needs to be addressed with a keen sense of its importance. At the same time the question as it affects the Church is influenced by the fact that *the place and role*

*of women in society at large is undergoing profound transformations.* Respect for women's rights is without doubt an essential step towards a more just and mature society, and the Church cannot fail to make her own this worthy objective.

Your Bishops' Conference has given much attention to the place of women in society and in the Church, and you will continue to do so. Other Episcopal Conferences and I myself have spoken and written extensively on the subject. However, in some circles there continues to exist a climate of dissatisfaction with the Church's position, especially where the distinction between a person's *human and civil rights* and the rights, duties, *ministries* and *functions* which individuals have or enjoy within the Church is not clearly understood. A faulty ecclesiology can easily lead to presenting false demands and raising false hopes.

What is certain is that the question cannot be resolved through a compromise with *a feminism* which polarizes along bitter, ideological lines. It is not simply that some people claim a right for women to be admitted to the ordained priesthood. In its extreme form, it is the Christian faith itself which is in danger of being undermined. Sometimes forms of nature worship and the celebration of myths and symbols take the place of the worship of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately this kind of feminism is being encouraged by some people in the Church, including some women Religious, whose beliefs, attitudes and behavior no longer correspond to what the Gospel and the Church teach. As Pastors we are to challenge individuals and groups having such beliefs and to call them to the honest and sincere dialogue that must go on, within the Church, on women's expectations.

6. In respect to not ordaining women to the ministerial priesthood, this "is a practice that the Church has always found in the expressed will of Christ, totally free and sovereign" (John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 51). The Church teaches and acts with reliance on the presence of the Holy Spirit and on the Lord's promise to be with her always (Mt. 28: 20). "When she judges that she cannot accept changes, it is because she knows that she is bound by Christ's manner of acting. Her attitude... is one of fidelity" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, 4). The equality of the baptized, which is one of the great affirmations of Christianity, exists in a differentiated body, in which men and women have roles which are not merely functional but are deeply rooted in Christian anthropology and sacramentology. The distinction of roles in no way favors the superiority of some over others; *the only better gift, which can and must be desired, is love* (Cf. 1Cor. 12: 13). In the Kingdom of Heaven the greatest are not the ministers but the saints (Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, 6).

I realize the amount of attention and prayerful reflection which you continue to give to these difficult questions, and I invoke the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon you as you strive to present a fully Christian anthropological and ecclesiological understanding of the role of women, both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the Church (Cf. *ibid.*). We are called as Bishops to hand on to men and women alike the Church's

teaching in its fullness with regard to the ordained priesthood. It would amount to a betrayal of them if we fail to do so. We must help those who do not understand or accept the Church's teaching to open their hearts and minds to the challenge of faith. We must confirm and strengthen the whole community by responding when necessary to confusion or error.

7. I shall shortly be returning your visit to Rome with my own visit to Denver. *With great anticipation I look forward to joining the young people from all over the world who will make this spiritual pilgrimage to find Christ in the heart of the "modern metropolis".* These biennial gatherings are unquestionably occasions of grace for the universal Church. They also release energies for spiritual renewal in the countries where they are celebrated. With thanksgiving we see from the experience of past "World Youth Days" that *young people are a powerful force for evangelization!* Their restless search for meaning and truth, their desire for close communion with God and with the ecclesial community, and their enthusiasm in serving their brothers and sisters are a challenge to all of us.

With filial trust I commend each of your particular Churches to the *loving intercession of Mary Immaculate*, Mother of the Redeemer and Patroness of your nation. May God abundantly bless your "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1Thess. 1: 2-3). May his love be poured forth upon the priests, Religious and laity of your Dioceses.

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