



The Holy See

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

Saturday, 5 June 1993

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. I welcome you – *the Bishops of Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee* – and extend cordial greetings to you and to the priests, deacons, Religious and lay faithful of your beloved Dioceses. "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom... that you may know... what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe" (Cf. Eph. 1: 17-19). I am particularly glad to meet you on the Eve of the Church's solemn celebration of the Feast of the Holy and Undivided Trinity.

It is precisely in the inner life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that the reality of hierarchical communion in the Church, to which the ancient custom of *ad Limina* visits testifies, has its model and deepest source. In order to strengthen the Church's visible unity, Christ makes each Successor of Peter its "visible source and foundation" (*Lumen Gentium*, 23). Because *my pastoral ministry on behalf of your particular Churches is intrinsic to their fullness of communion in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church*, it is only natural that I should rejoice in your many accomplishments, and share your trials and hardships with personal concern and affection. With sentiments of fraternal union I wish to continue the reflections I began last week with another group of Bishops from your country, *on the spiritual renewal of the Church in the United States*.

2. Today I will refer to some aspects of *sacramental life*. It is especially through the worthy celebration of the Sacraments that God's plan of redemption unfolds and takes effect in the lives of the Church's members. Through these actions of Christ himself, the Bridegroom communicates to his Bride the power of his saving death until he comes again in glory (Cf. 1Cor. 11: 26).

This whole series of *ad Limina* talks is following the outline of the recently published *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The *Catechism* is truly God's timely gift to the whole Church and to every Christian at the approach of the new millennium. Indeed, I pray that the Church in the United States will recognize in the *Catechism* an authoritative guide to sound and vibrant preaching, an invaluable resource for parish adult formation programs, a basic text for the upper grades of Catholic High Schools, Colleges and Universities. The *Catechism* presents in a clear and complete way the riches of the Church's sacramental doctrine, based on its genuine sources: Sacred Scripture and Tradition as witnessed to by the Fathers, Doctors and Saints, and by the constant teaching of the Magisterium.

3. From the dawn of the Church at Pentecost, conversion to Christ has been linked to Baptism as the way in which people are incorporated into the body of Christ (Cf. Acts. 2: 38). This regeneration is "not simply a seal of conversion, a kind of external sign indicating conversion and attesting to it. Rather, it is the Sacrament which signifies and effects rebirth from the Spirit" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 47). When the Church administers Baptism "for the remission of sins" – especially *original sin*, that state into which all are born deprived of original holiness and justice (Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 405)– its recipients become the Father's adopted children in the Son. They are formed into the likeness of Christ, united with him in the likeness of his Death and Resurrection (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 7), and are made holy and living temples of the Spirit (Cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 11-13).

At the beginning of my ministry in this Apostolic See, I approved the publication of the *Instruction on Infant Baptism*, which reaffirmed the Church's belief in the necessity of Baptism, and her immemorial practice of baptizing infants (Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Infant Baptism*, 3).

The Code of Canon Law incorporated this doctrine when it states that "parents are obliged to see to it that infants are baptized within the first weeks after birth" (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 867, 1; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1250-1252). In keeping with the salutary counsel that Baptism is to be celebrated only when a well-founded hope exists that the child will be raised as a Catholic and so allow the sacrament to bear fruit (Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Infant Baptism*, 30; *Code of Canon Law*, can. 868, 2), many Dioceses issued particular guidelines to implement these directives. Although intended neither to discourage infant Baptism nor to render its celebration unduly difficult, *such diocesan or parish guidelines have sometimes been applied in more restrictive ways than prescribed by the Holy See*. On occasion Baptism has been unwisely denied to parents requesting it for their child. Pastoral charity would bid us to welcome those who have strayed from the practice of their faith (Cf. Lk. 15: 4-7), and to refrain from making demands not required by Church doctrine or law. Nowhere is the gratuitous and unmerited nature of grace more evident than in infant Baptism: "not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation of our sins" (1Jn. 4: 10). It is certainly right that Pastors prepare parents for the worthy celebration of their child's Baptism, but it is also true that

this Sacrament of initiation is first of all a gift from the Father to the child itself.

4. The *forgiveness of sins* first experienced in Baptism is a recurring need in the life of every Christian. Restoring a proper sense of sin is the first step to be taken in facing squarely the grave spiritual crisis looming over men and women today, a crisis which can well be described as "an eclipse of conscience" (John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 18).

Without a healthy awareness of their own sinfulness, people will never experience the depth of God's redeeming love for them while they were still sinners (Cf. Rom. 5: 8). Given the prevailing idea that happiness consists in satisfying oneself and being satisfied with oneself, the Church must proclaim even more vigorously that *it is only God's grace, not therapeutic or self-convincing schemes, which can heal the divisions in the human heart caused by sinfulness* (Cf. *ibid.* 3: 24; Eph. 2: 5).

The pastoral ministry of Bishops and priests constantly comes up against a failure to recognize the full truth about the human person. As you have rightly pointed out, *a onesided and distorted anthropology presents the Church in America with a serious pastoral challenge* (Cf. NCCB, Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices, *Reflections on the Sacrament of Penance in Catholic Life Today*). What can be done to help Priests, Religious and laity to have a true and balanced sense of what it means to be unfaithful to God, and therefore to sin? Certainly, proper teaching is required. Undoubtedly the first stage in renewing the practice of the Sacrament of Penance is to preach clearly what Saint John tells us: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1Jn. 1: 8). By stirring up in peoples' hearts an ardent desire for forgiveness and the consolation of meeting the Father who is "rich in mercy" (Eph. 2: 4), those who preach the Gospel of salvation will *help the faithful to rediscover "the beauty and joy of the Sacrament of Penance"* (John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 48).

But knowledge needs to be accompanied by efforts to make as readily available and as helpful as possible the *practice of the Sacrament of Penance*. Despite some hopeful signs, this remains a grave and urgent pastoral problem.

I urge you to respond to it with concrete initiatives. During your 1988 *ad Limina* visit, I emphasized that "in something as sacred as this Sacrament *sporadic efforts are not enough to overcome the crisis*" (John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of the United States of America*, 31 May 1988). Once again I renew my appeal to you to *implement pastoral plans with the explicit purpose of encouraging frequent, devout and joyful celebration of Penance*.

5. One of the responsibilities of your Episcopal ministry is that of overseeing the observance of the doctrinal and liturgical norms governing the celebration of Penance (Cf. *Christus Dominus*, 15). *For Catholics in a state of mortal sin, individual and integral confession and absolution remains the ordinary way of being reconciled with God and the Church* (Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

n. 1484; *Code of Canon Law*, can. 960; John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 17). The absolving word of the Divine Physician – "your sins are forgiven" (Mk. 2: 5) – spoken by the priest acting *in persona Christi Capitis*, is addressed personally to the individual penitent. Any exceptions to this practice are governed by the conditions of *gravis necessitas* required for granting general absolution (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 961; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1483), to be understood according to the Church's clearly expressed mind in this regard.

Essential to the renewal of sacramental practice is the generosity of priests, zealous to serve as ambassadors of Christ's mercy (Cf. 2Cor. 5: 20), and wise in the ways in which the Holy Spirit leads the soul to ever greater love of God. *Programs of formation should provide priests with the training necessary to become good and holy confessors*. Seminarians need to have a full grasp of dogmatic, spiritual and moral theology. Inspired by the example of fervent priests, they should develop a pastoral sensibility founded on a sound psychology of the human person. They should grow to have a welcoming attitude and a deep compassion towards all those who seek God's mercy. Confessors, who are instruments of divine forgiveness, must be patient, never hurrying penitents or, as sometimes happens, restricting the number of sins they can confess. *Parishes should guarantee scheduled times for Penance* or, when pastoral need recommends it, make the Sacrament available to the faithful before Mass. Advent, Lent and the days of the Sacred Triduum are especially appropriate times for evoking conversion and celebrating the Sacrament of Penance.

6. We cannot speak of the spiritual renewal of your Dioceses without carefully examining also the state of your people's faith and participation in the Eucharist, which is the source, center and culmination of the Church's life (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1324-1327). Jesus' "sincere gift" of himself offered on the Cross is made present and applied in the Eucharist which "creates" his body, the Church (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 28; John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 26). It follows that stewarding this great mystery is among the greatest privileges and responsibilities of your Episcopal Office.

Regrettably, it can sometimes happen that the Liturgy is seriously marred by illicit omissions or additions to the approved texts. In such instances, "*it is for the Bishops to root out such abuses*, because the regulation of the Liturgy depends on the Bishop within the limits of the law" (John Paul II, *Vigesimalus Quintus Annus*, 13).

Because a Parish is essentially a Eucharistic community, it should have a priest who has the "utterly irreplaceable" role of offering Mass for the faithful (Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 26). Some of you are confronted with the situation of not being able to provide a priest for every community that has traditionally had one. As an interim and emergency measure – for Catholic doctrine would admit no other judgment –, it has become necessary in some places to conduct a Sunday celebration in the absence of a priest, and for this the Holy See has issued appropriate norms (Cf. Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, *Directorium de celebrationibus dominicalibus*

absente presbytero). Such situations offer only a *temporary solution*.

While greatly appreciating the generous assistance of Religious and members of the laity in this regard, a truly living community cannot resign itself to being without a priest to offer the Eucharist for them. Conscious of the urgent need of priests for the Church's continuing life and mission, I urge you to promote prayer for vocations, to become personally involved in inviting young men to consider this call, to appoint suitable priests as Vocations Directors in your dioceses, and to give them the support they need. In the meanwhile, such assemblies, which are "in expectation of a priest" (John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 27), are an occasion of many blessings for their participants.

7. My final thoughts this morning turn to Denver and the *World Day of Youth*, when I will have the opportunity to meet young men and women from all over America and the rest of the world. *I wish to express my deep gratitude to the Bishops and all those involved in preparing this event*. Thanks to your enthusiastic encouragement, many young men and women will be in Denver, where they will proclaim that Jesus Christ is their Companion on their pilgrim way (Cf. Jn. 15: 15) and the Giver of the fullness of life (Cf. *ibid.* 10: 10). We must pray that, from the heart of your beloved Nation, the world's youth will be stirred to accept the mission of proclaiming that they "have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1Pt. 1: 3).

Entrusting you, and all the priests, Religious and faithful of your Dioceses to the loving protection of Mary, the Virgin Mother of Mercy, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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