



The Holy See

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

Tuesday, 8 June 1993

Dear Brother Bishops,

"Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1: 4).

1. I welcome you this morning, *pastors chosen to shepherd the Lord's flock* (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 21) *in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming*. This *ad Limina* meeting testifies to the responsibility we have in common for all the Churches (Cf. 2Cor. 11: 28), and to *our shared duty to guard the truth* that has been entrusted to us by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us (Cf. 2Tm. 1: 14). We are experiencing this moment of fraternal union as the Church prepares to celebrate the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of the Lord. This solemn Feast affords us the opportunity to reaffirm that communion between the particular Churches in the universal Church is rooted above all in the Eucharist, "by which the unity of the Church is both signified and brought about" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 2). In this way we are reminded that only by being one with Christ in his self-offering to the Father, made present and applied at the Altar of Sacrifice, can we be worthy and effective instruments of the sanctification of God's beloved people.

In fact, in these *ad Limina* dialogues with the United States Bishops I have been referring to the Bishop's duty *to preach the call to holiness*. My conversations with the members of your Conference strengthen me in the conviction of the urgent need for *a genuine spiritual renewal in the life of the Church in your country*. You too must be convinced that the principal aim of your ministry is to lead the people entrusted to you to "put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4: 23). All the other demands made on you take their sense and purpose from this fundamental task.

2. Last week I spoke to another group of Bishops about some aspects of Baptism, Penance and the Eucharist. Today I wish to say something about *Marriage and Holy Orders, two sacraments ordained to the corporate life of the ecclesial community*. Those who receive these Sacraments are consecrated by the Holy Spirit for a special mission in the Church, either as Christian spouses and parents or as pastors of souls (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1534-1535). The general crisis of values in society has had an especially harmful effect on the way these two Sacraments are considered and lived. But the Church, as a living and dynamic reality whose strength is the Gospel, "the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Rom. 1: 16), must react to *defend the whole truth and support the rightful application of God's intentions for marriage and the priesthood*.

3. An outlook expressing the supposed absolute autonomy of personal judgement claims to see the family as just one of many freely chosen and disposable institutions whose purpose is to foster the individual's self-fulfillment. This outlook gives rise to efforts to legitimize other so-called "domestic partnerships" which claim rights that properly belong only to families. Instead, for the Church, marriage and the family are sacred realities. They are not simply a personal lifestyle, the personal project of the individuals involved. Respect for God's will so clearly revealed in the order of creation (Cf. Gen. 1: 26-28) demands that the Church oppose any attempt to redefine marriage and the family on any other basis. The Church continues to proclaim that authentic family values can only be built upon marriage between man and woman as ordained "in the beginning" (Cf. Mt. 19: 4). Pastors should encourage the laity to assume their full responsibility for promoting civil laws, national policy and social institutions that defend and foster the rights and duties of the family in its original truth (Cf. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 44).

In a recent statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, you noted with alarm that the United States has "the highest divorce rate, the highest teen-age pregnancy rate, the highest child poverty rate and the highest abortion rate in the Western world" (United States Catholic Conference, *Putting Children and Families First*, 1991, n. II, A). These indications of social and moral breakdown provide a serious challenge for the Catholic community to respond with pastoral realism. Serious attention should be given to *strengthening the sense of marriage and family life among Catholics themselves*, especially among young couples preparing for marriage.

A rich and demanding program of preparation for catechumens has given excellent results in many Dioceses of the United States. Given the importance of marriage as the vocational sacrament through whose grace most men and women are sanctified, and children are schooled in life as well as in faith, an *analogous spiritual preparation for those who are to be married* "in the Lord" (Cf. 1Cor. 7: 39) is surely needed. A strengthening of Pre-Cana and other programs, and the personal involvement of priests in the spiritual preparation of couples will help provide the foundation for stronger marriages. Moreover, just as the catechumenate is followed by a period of *mystagogia*, so also sustained pastoral care should be offered to the newly married.

4. This year the Church celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of "Humanae Vitae", in which Pope Paul VI reaffirmed *the teaching on the immorality of separating – intentionally and by artificial means – the two intrinsic meanings of the marital act: the unitive and the procreative* (Cf. Paul VI, Humanae Vitae, 14). This teaching has been repeated over and over again in the Church during the past twenty-five years (Cf., ex. gr., John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio, 29-33). The "Catechism of the Catholic Church" clearly reaffirms it (Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2370).

However, inadequate and insufficient explanation is at least partially responsible for the fact that many Catholics have difficulty in applying that teaching. The challenge is to make better known and appreciated the dignity and joy of human sexuality lived according to the truth of the body's nuptial meaning. In programs for marriage preparation, and other pastoral efforts directed to the support of marriage and family life, couples should be presented with the full truth of God's plan for living their conjugal love with integrity.

Again, I encourage you and your Brother Bishops of the United States to give generous support to natural family planning programs. *Each Diocese should candidly examine its priorities to determine whether it provides the necessary means to make better known the natural methods of regulating fertility* (Cf. John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio, 35). Likewise, in your ministry you should inspire confidence and hope in parents, emphasizing the joys and challenges of their vocation. Pastoral charity requires that Church agencies be particularly concerned with families in difficulty, broken families, one parent families, but it also demands that the central object of the Church's pastoral attention should be the traditional, stable family where education, socialization and transmission of Catholic faith and values is accomplished. The Holy See, acknowledging the value of the United Nations proposal to make 1994 the Year of the Family, has willingly adhered to that initiative. At the local level, Dioceses and Catholic institutions are called to take this opportunity in order to increase their efforts to defend and promote family life.

5. Recognizing the new challenges to be met in preparing men to be priests for the Third Millennium of Christianity, the last Synod of Bishops dealt at length with the question of priestly formation. Garnering the fruits of this discussion, I subsequently issued the Apostolic Exhortation "Pastores Dabo Vobis" to guide Pastors and all concerned in their task of revitalizing the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral preparation of seminarians. I am encouraged too by *your Conference's approval of the revised "Program of Priestly Formation"*. That document provides a solid framework for formation insofar as it clearly presents the sacramental consecration of the priest as a configuration to Jesus Christ so that he can truly act *in persona Christi Capitis* and in the name of the Church (Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1548-1553). No other way of conceiving the priesthood does justice to the Church's understanding of the Lord's intentions. It remains only for me to urge you to be demanding in the selection of candidates, to provide well-qualified priests for seminary ministry, and not to compromise the standards required by the challenges facing priests today. Only the Ordinary can call a candidate to the diaconate and priesthood. He must therefore feel personally responsible before the Lord and before the Church for the decisions he makes in this regard.

I pray that the increase in candidates to the priesthood, apparent in some Dioceses, will be the beginning of a trend that will spread to all corners of your great country. Bishops who know their seminarians and who take time to shepherd them as spiritual sons will build Churches strong in fraternity and spiritual communion. The consistent witness of your own zeal for souls, your own fidelity to the Gospel transmitted in the Church, your interior joy and simple life style, will so often provide the example from which men are first able to recognize their call to priesthood.

6. For the new evangelization to bear fruit, the Church will need priests whose *spiritual life has been shaped by asceticism, interior discipline, a spirit of sacrifice and self-denial* (John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 48). Where a culture of self-centeredness and self-indulgence has made inroads, these essential virtues and dispositions need to be given specific attention in spiritual formation. The ministerial priesthood marks a man permanently and indelibly in his inner being (Cf. *ibid.* 70). It is not a profession or a "career" in the secular sense. A certain worldliness, exaggerated financial concerns and secular attitudes towards "retirement" are among the factors that work against fostering a genuine pastoral charity which flows from an interior life enlivened by the Spirit (Cf. *ibid.* 19). Bishops and priests together must face these demands and rise to the challenges involved. Similarly, associations whose purpose is to support priests by providing opportunities for fraternal support and spiritual growth, thus rejuvenating enthusiasm for their ministry, deserve your encouragement.

Permit me a few words of confidence about situations that profoundly grieve you and so many others, and whose burden we all feel deeply (Cf. Gal. 6: 2). As a "fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ" (1Pt. 5: 1). *I share your sadness and disappointment* when those entrusted with the sacred ministry fail *in their commitment*, becoming a cause of public scandal that undermines peoples' trust in the Church's Pastors and damages priestly morale. *These failures are tragic for the victims and for the clerics involved*. We must pray ardently for all those affected by this misconduct, knowing that our Redeemer is close to those who suffer injustice from the hands of others, and that his mercy reaches the contrite of heart.

The failures of a small number of clerics make it all the more important that *seminary formation discern scrupulously the charism of celibacy among candidates for the priesthood*. This requirement is not just a passing legal norm or an externally imposed condition for ordination, but a value profoundly linked with the priest's sharing in the Bridegroom's care of his Body, the Church (Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 50). By supporting their healthy psychosexual development, a sound human formation and growth in grace and virtue will enable seminarians to accept joyfully and live serenely this "precious gift of God" (*Optatam Totius*, 10), by which they share in Christ's spousal self-giving to the Church (Cf. Eph. 5: 25-27), whereby he loves his People with a pure, generous and constant heart (Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 22).

7. Finally, my thoughts turn to the World Youth Day in Denver, which is fast approaching. There we will join young people from all over the world to profess with Peter: "You are the Christ, the Son

of the living God" (Mt. 16: 16); "You have the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6: 68). This is a *pilgrimage of faith and friendship* to encounter Christ in the City – in his Eucharistic self-offering, in the sufferings of our brothers and sisters, in the prayers of his People. May the Savior who gave himself "for the life of the world" (Ibid. 6: 51) find a youth prepared to meet him, encouraged by your generous assistance and enthusiasm. Young people are special gifts to the Church, heralds of hope and protagonists of *Christianity's new springtime* (Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 86).

In this era of the Church, the Holy Spirit perpetuates the grace of Pentecost, preserving unity, guiding Christ's disciples into the fullness of truth (Cf. Jn. 16: 13) and enlivening the communion of all the faithful (Cf. John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 25).

Yet, like her Spouse and Lord, the Church must also pass through an earthly "hour" (Cf. Jn. 17: 1) of dedicated commitment and work, even of suffering. I pray that Our Lady of Guadalupe, Protectress of the Americas, to whom I entrust the priests, Religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses, will accompany and strengthen you in your ministry. Through her maternal mediation may she obtain for you a share in her unfaltering faith, constant hope and fervent love. With my Apostolic Blessing.

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