



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, 20 March 1993

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. "I bow my knees before the Father... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Eph.3: 14-17). As we begin this series of *ad Limina* visits of the Bishops of the United States, this is the prayer which I make for the Church in your great and beloved nation: that the faith of the Church's Bishops may be renewed and strengthened so that all the faithful may be helped to live their Christian vocation with integrity and courage! This morning I welcome you, the first group of Bishops – *from Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin*. Your *ad Limina* visit brings you to Rome to venerate the tombs of the glorious martyrs, Peter and Paul, who established this "greatest and most ancient Church" (Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 3, 2), and to meet Peter's Successor in this Apostolic See which "presides over the universal communion of charity" (Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Romanos*, prooem.). I greet you with warm fraternal affection in the Lord.

Over the course of the year I shall meet with successive groups of Bishops from the United States. These meetings have a profound meaning for all of us. They are expressions of *the collegial structure of the Church's hierarchical communion*. On these occasions we deeply experience the spiritual solidarity of those who have "one Lord, one faith, one Baptism", and are "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4: 5. 3). While our private conversations deal with the situation of your individual Dioceses, these group meetings give me an opportunity to share with you and your brother Bishops in the United States some thoughts on more general aspects of your ministry and of the Church's life in your country. I wish to do so in the light of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, recently published, and which should soon be available in its English translation. This gift of Divine Providence—the result of a desire expressed by the Bishops at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod (1985 Extraordinary Synod, *Relatio finalis*, II, B, a, 4) is

authoritative expression of the full riches and marvellous harmony of the Catholic faith. I consider its publication among the principal fruits of the Second Vatican Council and one of the most significant events of my Pontificate. It is an invaluable instrument of the genuine ecclesial renewal which the Council intended. Following the structure of the Catechism, I wish to meditate with the various groups of Bishops on certain aspects of *believing, praying, celebrating and living "the Catholic faith that comes to us from the Apostles"* ("Præx Eucharistia I").

2. From the beginning, I make these reflections in the context of *a trusting and steadfast profession of the Church's faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. We ourselves must be constantly renewed in our own faith if we are effectively to fulfill our mission as Successors of the Apostles. As Bishops we, above all, are "witnesses of Christ before all people" (*Christus Dominus*, 11), "preachers of the faith who lead new disciples to Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, 25). "Rightly handling the word of truth" (2Tm. 2: 15), we must hand on what we ourselves have received (Cf. 1Cor. 15: 3). As Bishops we have been configured to Christ in the fullness of the priesthood in order to proclaim that word and teach it, not as our own, but in accord with the whole of the Church's tradition and in communion with the other members of the Episcopal College, always in union with its head.

Despite the inroads of secularization, people crave a genuine experience of God in prayer and an inner spiritual life as antidotes to the dehumanizing elements in modern living (Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 38). Sometimes even Catholics have lost or have never had the chance to experience Christ personally: not Christ as a mere "paradigm" or "value", but the living Lord: "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14: 6). In addressing this need we, like Saint Paul, must never drift far from the core of the message: "Christ crucified... Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1Cor. 1: 23-24). In fact, the mystery of the Eternal Son's Incarnation, Passion, Death and Resurrection: this is the unfathomable "treasure" (Cf. 2Cor. 4: 7) which is preached, celebrated and lived in the Catholic Church. This is the "saving grace" which God offers through our ministry to those who are searching for him, to everyone without distinction. *Jesus Christ is the Good News which the world is waiting for*, and it is our duty to speak that message clearly in his name.

3. Furthermore, because people are moved more by the witness of our lives than by the power of our speech, they have a right to see in their Pastors men whose entire lives are centered on Jesus Christ, "the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father" (Jn. 1: 18). They expect that, like the Apostles, the first witnesses, we too will transmit what, by God's grace, we have "seen with our eyes... looked upon and touched with our hands" (1Jn. 1: 1): *contemplata aliis tradere*. It falls above all to the Bishop to build up a believing community by handing on the Church's faith and by explaining her authoritative teaching and discipline in a positive way, in a way that is relevant to the difficulties and problems which worry people and weigh them down (Cf. *Christus Dominus*, 13).

Since "the word of God is living and active" (Hebr. 4: 12), its full power comes alive in communities where the "obedience of faith" (Rom. 1: 5) is given freely and with love. Our own profession of

faith, sustained by fervent prayer, is therefore extremely pertinent to our efforts to communicate, with serenity, enthusiasm and courage, the communion of life which we share with the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit (Cf. 1Jn. 1: 3). Every day I pray for you and your fellow Bishops that you "be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4: 23-24). The same favor I would ask of you: continue to pray that I fulfill faithfully my ministry as primary guardian of the deposit of faith, for the good of the Church throughout the world.

4. In meeting the challenges of your Episcopal office you confront *a cultural climate in which many are suspicious of, if not hostile to, any claim of certainty in the knowledge of the truth*. A positivist approach has produced a tendency to exclude questions of ultimate truth from the public sphere, and to confine religious belief and judgements on basic moral values to the private sphere. Consequently, the direction which society takes is often the result of the prevailing "consensus", which itself is open to various forms of conditioning by those who have the means to make their voices heard above those of others. In the end, even the law, which has a powerful formative influence on the way people think, can be separated from its foundation in morality. In this case it is seen as an instrument for externally regulating society without reference to the objective moral order.

It follows that you face particular difficulties in preaching and teaching "the word of truth, the gospel of... salvation" (Eph. 1: 13). The majority of American Catholics understand that *the assent of faith is sublimely consonant with human dignity* insofar as it is a free act of intelligence which welcomes God's word, received through the Church's preaching and teaching, trusting in God who can neither deceive nor be deceived (Cf. First Vatican Council , *Dei Filius*: Denz.-Schönm., 3008; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 156). At the same time, the moral, psychological and cultural pressures of life in the United States today are tempting some in the Church to compromise her teachings and her discipline, to the grave detriment of souls. In a climate of religious individualism, some assume the right to decide for themselves, even in important matters of faith, which teachings to accept, while ignoring those they find unacceptable. Selectivity in adhering to authoritative Church teaching, as I said to you in Los Angeles during my 1987 Pastoral Visit, is incompatible with being "a good Catholic", and by its very nature it poses an obstacle to full participation in ecclesial life (Cf. John Paul II, *Meeting with the Bishops of the United States of America in Los Angeles*, 5, 16 September 1987). It is the Bishops' task to call the whole Catholic community to accept in its fullness the Church's authoritative teaching on faith and morals. And Pastors and others of good faith should not be discouraged, as though the Church's teaching on certain issues has been irretrievably lost. With the help of Christ, who has "overcome the world" (Jn. 16: 33), it is never futile to preach, teach, and work against error, following Saint Paul's advice to be "urgent in season and out of season..." (2Tm. 4: 2).

5. As you wrote in your recent Statement, *The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop: A Pastoral Reflection*, Bishops best respond to "insufficient, defective or erroneous teaching" by a

"positive, effective, consistent and forthright" presentation of Catholic doctrine (Bishops of the United States of America, *Statement, The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop: A Pastoral Reflection*, prooem.). Indeed, only when your teaching is clear, unambiguous and united will it rise above the clash of conflicting opinions with the forcefulness and power of the truth. While certainly acknowledging the fact that the Church presents her teaching with varying degrees of magisterial authority (Cf. *ibid.* II. 2), it is necessary to recover a sense of the wholeness and interior logic—the "symphony" of the faith. Undoubtedly the greatest service you can render to the Church at this present time is to make every effort to present anew the fullness and beauty of the apostolic faith, and thereby end the disharmony and confusion produced by teachings on questions of faith, morals and discipline which are at odds with the Church's Magisterium.

With the extensive system of Catholic schools at all levels, parish catechetical programs for children and adults, and the Catholic press and other media available to the Church in the United States, you have the means to enrich the members of the Church with a deeper and more secure knowledge of the faith, so that they will be better equipped to bear witness to that faith in the family and in the wider community. It is my prayerful hope that the new Catechism will provide the impetus for a national recatechizing endeavor, of young and old alike, so that the Catholics of America will be more and more able to account for the hope that is in them (Cf. 1Pt. 3: 15). In this way they will be able to make an ever more specific and effective contribution in addressing the serious ethical and social questions facing the nation.

6. The Millennial Jubilee of the year 2000 invites the whole Church to prepare to commemorate the Eternal Son's redemptive Incarnation. The *National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization* recently approved by your Conference offers a framework for such preparation. A continuing conversion of mind and heart accompanied by intensified prayer, joyful and frequent celebration of the Sacraments and a moral life compatible with Christian discipleship, will make the Catholic community in the United States ready to welcome the Jubilee with total confidence in Jesus Christ, the Lord of History, who is "the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Hebr. 13: 8). Moreover, beyond all strategies and objectives, all plans and assessments, let us never forget that the Holy Spirit is the driving force of all conversion and growth in holiness; and there are many promising signs of his presence and action in every one of your Dioceses.

I am confidently looking forward to the celebration of the World Youth Day in Denver, in August, as a magnificent occasion to proclaim anew to young people the saving mystery of Christ who said: "I came that they might have life, and have it to the full" (Jn. 10: 10). I thank you for all that you are doing in your Dioceses to enable as many young people as possible to take part in this important ecclesial event, as a sign and testimony of the vitality of the Church in your country.

7. Dear Brother Bishops, at the Last Supper Jesus invited his disciples to friendship with himself, telling them that they were no longer servants (Cf. *ibid.* 15: 13-14) and sealing this intimacy with the Eucharist. The Lord continues to draw you, Successors of the Apostles, into his confidence, in

order to confirm you in his truth so that *you, in turn, may proclaim its fresh and liberating power to the People of God entrusted to your pastoral care*. The greatest witness of the Apostles lies in their martyrdom, and this is the example which we must keep before our eyes as we seek to build up and strengthen God's beloved people in faithfulness to the chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ (Cf. 1Pt. 5: 4). I entrust to Mary, Mother of the Church, the burdens and joys of your office and the needs and hopes of the Church in the United States. To each of you and to all the priests, religious and laity of your Dioceses I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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