



The Holy See

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

*Saturday, 22 May 1993 Dear Brother Bishops,*1. With fraternal affection I welcome you, the first of the two groups of Australian Bishops to come to Rome this year for your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. In greeting you I embrace in spirit all the beloved clergy, religious and laity of the particular Churches under your pastoral care: "To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1: 1-2). Your coming from so far away bears eloquent witness to the universal character of the Church, which the Spirit has caused to spread from Jerusalem to the farthest corners of the earth (Cf. Acts. 1: 8). Your presence is an affirmation of the bonds of ecclesial communion which unite the faithful of your Dioceses with the Bishop of Rome. Although nearly seven years have passed since I visited Australia, I still recall with great fondness the warmth and love with which I was welcomed there. Today I would like to consider some aspects of the Episcopal Office and some of the consequences which more immediately follow from it. Then, with the next group of Bishops, there will be the opportunity to give further thought to some of the particular challenges facing the Church in Australia.2. When in the First Letter to the Corinthians Saint Paul asserts that he has "handed on" to the Christians at Corinth what he himself had received (1Cor. 11: 23; 15: 3), he speaks out of a profound awareness of the role which God gave him in the work of salvation. His words bear witness to the fact that he considers himself a link in passing on to those he served the gift given by God the Father in his Only-Begotten Son (Cf. *Dei Verbum*, 7). In order that the salvation offered by the Father once for all in Christ would be available in every age, the Apostles in turn passed on to some of their co-workers their own mission and responsibility. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council put it: "In order to keep the Gospel forever whole and alive within the Church, the apostles left Bishops as their successors, 'handing over their own teaching role' to them" (Ibid.). Thus the members of the College of Bishops in every age are called to do what the Apostles did: *to keep the deposit* (Cf. 1Tm. 6: 20) and *to hand on what they themselves have received* (Cf. 1Cor. 15: 3). Understanding this sacred office more deeply is an indispensable part of discharging it more faithfully. To understand what it means to be a Bishop we should consider carefully the nature of the deposit entrusted by the Apostles to their successors. As the Council points out, "what was handed on by the apostles includes everything which contributes to the holiness of life and the increase in faith of the people of God: and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is and all that she believes" (*Dei Verbum*, 8). The Good News of life in Christ, and that very life itself, have been transmitted to us so that "entire and incorrupt" (*De Ordinatione Episcopali*) they will be available for all mankind. This then is your high calling: to be stewards of that Trinitarian communion which the Father offers to the human race through his Son in the Holy Spirit.3. This leads us to consider first *the Bishops' role in the sanctification of the faithful, especially*

through the liturgy. The Council describes Bishops as "the principal dispensers of the mysteries of God... the governors, the promoters and the guardians of the entire liturgical life in the Church committed to them" (*Christus Dominus*, 15). The Fathers of the Council indicated that one of the most significant duties of the Bishop's priestly office is "to ensure that the faithful take part in the liturgy knowingly, actively and fruitfully" (*Ibid.* 11). What you and your predecessors have done in this regard over the last three decades cannot be passed over without a word of commendation. However, your reports do not hide the anxiety which you are experiencing in relation to the liturgical life of the faithful in your nation: the continuing decline in Sunday Mass attendance in Australia is justifiably a cause of concern. Efforts to bring all Catholics back to the weekly celebration of the Eucharist and to frequent use of the Sacrament of Penance – which offers "the certainty of forgiveness through the power of the redeeming blood of Christ" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 28) – are fundamental to all genuine liturgical renewal, because they are fundamental to ecclesial life itself. Without continuing catechesis in this regard there will be no realistic striving for that "full and active participation" in the Sacred Mysteries called for by the Council (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14). The Bishop's place in the Church's sanctifying mission leads him to have special concern for the observance of liturgical law in his diocese. The liturgy is, as the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council remind us, "the outstanding means by which the faithful can express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2). Clearly then the sacred rites should be celebrated in accord with the mind of the Church, for she is the one to whom Christ has revealed himself, and she has ordered her liturgy to express what he has taught her (Cf. John Paul II, *Vicesimus Quintus Annus*, 10; *Code of Canon Law*, [can. 846](#)). Unfortunately, excesses in one direction or another have led to a certain polarization within communities. Perhaps it is appropriate to repeat what I wrote in the Letter "*Dominicae Cenae*": "The problems of the liturgy, and in particular of the Eucharistic Liturgy, must not be *an occasion for dividing Catholics and for threatening the unity of the Church*. This is demanded by an elementary understanding of that sacrament which Christ has left us as the source of spiritual unity. And how could the Eucharist, which in the Church is the *sacramentum pietatis, signum unitatis, vinculum caritatis*, form between us at this time a point of division and a source of distortion of thought and behaviour, instead of being the focal point and constitutive centre, which it truly is in its essence, of the unity of the Church herself?" (John Paul II, *Dominicae Cenae*, 13). If in some instances liturgical renewal has been seen merely in terms of external change or adaptation, it is necessary now to place appropriate emphasis on the liturgy's transcendent character: "every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his Body the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7). The spiritual vitality of your communities depends greatly on the dignified and worthy celebration of the liturgy. In all of this you need the support and help of your priests and all the faithful, but the greatest responsibility lies with you who have received the fullness of the sacrament of the priesthood.⁴ A Bishop prays, exhorts and works to ensure that every aspect of the life of the Christian community favours the working of the Holy Spirit in the minds and hearts of the faithful. The promotion of the common discipline of the whole Church and the observance of ecclesiastical laws (Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, [can. 392 § 1](#)) are not secondary elements in the fulfilment of this obligation. The canons and norms of the Church exist to preserve the structure in which is incarnated the life entrusted to the Church by Christ. They form the structure through which that life is mediated to the Church's members. Consequently, we must reject a false dichotomy between pastoral charity and vigorous pastoral government. Charity requires that one should act justly, and justice demands that a Bishop should teach and foster a form of ecclesial life which, because it conforms to the Church's laws, builds up and sustains "the community of faith, hope and charity, as a visible structure, through which (the Lord) communicates truth and grace to all" (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). Nor can it be claimed that fidelity to the Second Vatican Council justifies laxity in ecclesiastical discipline. The Church's canons have been thoroughly and authoritatively revised, in order to reflect the insight about the mystery of Christ and the Church given by the Holy Spirit at

that same Council. To ignore these norms or to permit their violation would be to allow that insight to be obscured or forgotten.⁵ In relation to *the Bishop's teaching role*, I have high hopes that the *"Catechism of the Catholic Church"* will call forth from the Church in Australia ever more zealous efforts to uphold and teach Catholic doctrine. I am confident that this compendium of the faith will make it all the easier to ensure that the catechetical texts prepared for the Christian faithful of all ages and at every stage of their development will be accurate, systematic and complete expressions of the Church's teachings. And since in the task of religious instruction no element has as great an impact as the teachers themselves, it is especially important that the *Catechism* should be warmly received and properly assimilated by those who aspire to serve as catechists. It is even more important for priests, especially parish priests, to give the example of their own tireless efforts to communicate to children, young people and adults the riches of the Church's doctrinal heritage as expressed in the *Catechism*. With so many Catholic children attending the well-established system of *Catholic schools in your country*, there is ample opportunity for thorough catechesis. In these schools pupils are taught that the realities of this world and life in Christ are inextricably linked: in Christ the whole cosmos receives its fullest meaning, for "in him all things were created" and "through him all things have been reconciled to the Father" (Cf. Col. 1: 16. 20). They learn that it is the vocation of Christians to be instruments of the restoration of all things in Christ. High praise is due to those who at no little personal cost have contributed to setting up and supporting these schools. I likewise share your satisfaction at the recent foundation of two Catholic universities. This expansion of the scope of Catholic tertiary education holds great promise for the life and mission of the Church. It will help students to achieve that synthesis between faith and culture, faith and science, to which Catholic institutions of higher learning are dedicated by way of a corporate commitment (Cf. John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1. 14). Your network of Catholic education is a precious heritage, and the most appropriate way to show gratitude is to hand it on to the next generation with an even stronger Catholic identity and institutional stability. I join you in urging the Catholic parents of Australia to make the greatest possible use of these schools and to support them as the appropriate way of fulfilling their responsibility to educate their children.⁶ After speaking of preaching and catechesis, schools and other academic institutions, the Council's Decree *"Christus Dominus"* mentions the *communications media* as a further important means of proclaiming the Gospel (*Christus Dominus*, 13). You serve as Pastors in a country possessing a well-developed system of social communications, and therefore you have a wide choice of effective instruments for evangelization. This is an area in which the laity, especially professional people, are called to play an outstanding part in the Church's mission. But there are aspects of the Church's presence in the media which require the Bishop's personal attention and careful vigilance. In particular he should make efforts to satisfy the faithful's right to sound teaching, offsetting the harm which inevitably arises from the spreading of confused ideas about faith and morals. It should be made clear that not every Catholic who expresses an opinion in the media is speaking on behalf of the Church. A prompt refutation of error and an unambiguous reaffirmation of authentic teaching by the Bishop is often a needed manifestation of pastoral charity (Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on some aspects of the use of the instruments of social communication in promoting the doctrine of the faith*, 30 March 1992). It is important that media professionals should have the spiritual support and firm solidarity of the whole community in order to succeed in making the Gospel more present.⁷ Dear Brother Bishops, I have spoken of some of the duties of your episcopal office. I have done so out of my closeness to your concern for the people of God entrusted to your care. The grace of Christ and the power of his Cross and Resurrection are the sources of your confidence, and so you must constantly take heart and lead the faithful in the *new evangelization* required to meet the challenges of the present time. I pray that God who has called you to be Pastors of his flock will sustain you in your labours on behalf of his people. I commend you and the whole Church in Australia to Our Lady Help of Christians, and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing. © Copyright 1993 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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