



The Holy See

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

Thursday, 11 November 1993

Your Eminence,

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. With fraternal affection I welcome you – the *Bishops of New Jersey and Pennsylvania* – and pray that our meeting will further strengthen our unity of heart and mind (Cf. Acts 4: 32), and our communion in faith, hope and charity. "May mercy, peace and love be multiplied to you" (Jude 1: 2). United with Christ and with one another, we share the sublime privilege of the episcopal ministry, as bearers of the Gospel message of salvation to the world, to every individual and to all peoples. The fulfilment of this task, including *the missionary mandate* which it involves, may seem as difficult and challenging today as it did when the Apostles first set out to preach the truth of the Gospel to all creation (Cf. Mk. 16: 15). We need constantly to reaffirm our trust in the Lord's words: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt. 28: 20). With this certainty, your "*ad limina*" visit is an occasion for us to support and encourage one another in the fulfilment of our ministry, remembering the words of Saint Paul, that "it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy" (1Cor. 4: 2).

2. To speak of *mission* is to recall *the fundamental and personal duty of every Bishop to evangelize*: to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to communicate divine life through the sacraments. This means going out in search of the men and women of our time, with a sensitive and loving heart, spreading the grace and love which come from the Spirit. It means helping them to recover a sense of the transcendence of God, the Father of all, who is to be adored "in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4: 23). It means bearing witness to the power of the Cross of Christ (Cf. 1Cor. 1: 17) in a complex and often confused social and cultural context.

In fulfilling these tasks, the disciple of Christ is constantly challenged by a spreading "practical atheism" – an indifference to God's loving plan which obscures the religious and moral sense of the human heart. Many either think and act as if God did not exist, or tend to "privatize" religious belief and practice, so that there exists a bias towards indifferentism and the elimination of any real reference to binding truths and moral values. When the basic principles which inspire and direct human behavior are fragmentary and even at times contradictory, society increasingly struggles to maintain harmony and a sense of its own destiny. In a desire to find some common ground on which to build its programmes and policies, it tends to restrict the contribution of those whose moral conscience is formed by their religious beliefs.

3. Against this background and trusting in the word of her Saviour, *the Church invites the faithful to let their light shine before the world* (Cf. Mt. 5: 16) and to communicate to society the religious and ethical principles which give full meaning to human life. In this way the Church seeks to sustain an urgent and necessary dialogue with contemporary culture, especially with regard to moral principles. Fundamental moral principles, in fact, are an essential ingredient of the formation of public policy, as was clearly understood and intended by your nation's Founding Fathers. As I had occasion to say during my recent visit to Denver: "Only by instilling *a high moral vision* can a society ensure that its young people are given the possibility to mature as free and intelligent – human beings, endowed with a robust sense of responsibility for the common good, capable of working with others to create a community and a nation with a strong moral fibre. *America was built on such a vision*, and the American people possess the intelligence and will to meet the challenge of rededicating themselves with renewed vigor to fostering the truths on which [their] country was founded and by which it grew" (John Paul II, *Welcome ceremony at the International Airport of Denver*, 3, 12 August 1993). Perhaps more than ever before in the history of your country, Catholics who are aware of the Church's true intellectual heritage can make a clarifying and much needed contribution to the discussion of the direction in which society must go if it is to be truly just and truly free.

Such a dialogue is fostered by "emphasizing the rational – and thus universally understandable and communicable – character of moral norms belonging to the sphere of the natural moral law" (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 36).

It is a blessing that the Church in the United States has been successful in educating and motivating many lay people to contribute actively to the public debate on important issues, and to become personally involved in public service. This is their right and duty, deriving from their vocation "to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them to God's will" (*Lumen Gentium*, 31). The Pastors need to call on the Catholic people of the United States to realize ever more clearly that society needs the testimony of their Christian life and good works, as well as their capacity to explain and defend certain fundamental truths and values essential to society's well-being, especially in relation to the inalienable dignity and value of human life, and its transmission in a stable family setting.

4. In a spirit of fraternal solidarity, I encourage your efforts to assert the Church's teaching on the absolute inviolability of human life from the moment of conception until natural death (Cf. *Centesimus Annus*, 47). The pro-life movement, overwhelmingly dependent upon the work of lay persons who have provided both its leadership and "grass roots" support, deserves your continued support and guidance. *To defend the right to life of unborn children is one of the greatest human rights issues of our day*. This is the only "choice" open to conscience, which as I wrote in "*Veritatis splendor*" – "expresses itself in acts of 'judgment' which reflect the truth about the good, and not in arbitrary 'decisions'. The maturity and responsibility of these judgments – and, when all is said and done, of the individual who is their subject – are not measured by the liberation of the conscience from objective truth, in favor of an alleged autonomy in personal decision, but, on the contrary, by an insistent search for truth and by allowing oneself to be guided by that truth in one's actions" (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 61).

Since it is never lawful to do evil in order that good may come of it (Cf. Rom. 3: 8; cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 79-83), Catholics have a duty to promote legislation which corresponds to the moral law and to seek to reform legislation which does not reflect the truth of man's dignity and transcendent destiny, always by lawful means and rational debate. As a Conference, you have rightly asserted that safeguarding respect for the sanctity and dignity of human life is – the primary and decisive criterion to be used in evaluating public policy (Cf. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Resolution on Health Care Reform*, 18 June 1993). I pray that society will take up your challenge "to put children and families first" and will support your endeavors "*to promote life – giving alternatives to abortion*" by encouraging the loving choice of adoption and programmes of support for pregnant women, especially among the poor (Cf. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation and World*, 14 November 1991, VI.A.1).

5. Catholics should also express their deep concern regarding *the grave threats to human dignity posed by euthanasia, assisted suicide and all other actions* which put at risk the elderly, the ailing and the disadvantaged. Despite the intentions or circumstances, direct euthanasia is an act which is always and *per se* intrinsically evil (Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 80; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2277) – a violation of divine law, an offense against the dignity of the human person. The faithful are looking to you as spiritual and moral teachers to make ever more widely known, with clarity and compassion, the Church's teaching on the end – of – life questions increasingly faced by so many families and health personnel. Naturally, that teaching should be placed in the wider context of *the whole Christian approach to suffering*, whereby "the redemptive value of suffering, accepted and offered to God with love, derives from the sacrifice of Christ himself, who calls the members of his Mystical Body to share in his sufferings, to complete them in their own flesh (Cf. Col. 1: 24)". (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 78). Indeed, in a society which often values people more for what they "do" or "have" than for who they "are", the Church must continue to implement the Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan. Her pastoral activity "for" and "with" the infirm ought to be solidly grounded on the affirmation that, because we are all created in

the image and likeness of God (Cf. Gen. 1: 27), we enjoy *an indestructible personal dignity which is not lessened by pain or serious illness* (Cf. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 37). The witness of a convincing solidarity with the suffering and the dying should be the normal mark of a society genuinely on the side of life.

6. Dear Brothers: integral to our prophetic mission as heralds of "the truth of the Gospel" (Gal. 2: 14) is the challenge to proclaim the Church's full teaching on *the responsible transmission of human life within marriage*. I note with satisfaction your Conference's statement entitled *Human Sexuality from God's Perspective*, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Encyclical "*Humanae Vitae*", This is an opportune moment for you to increase your efforts to restore respect for God's wise and loving plan for human sexuality, With admirable clarity, my predecessor Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the Church's constant tradition of "the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning" (Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, 12). A fully consistent ethic of life requires a concerted effort by Bishops, moral theologians and pastors of souls to help the faithful to understand more clearly that *conjugal fulfilment is linked to respect for the intrinsic meaning and purpose of human sexuality*.

An enormous challenge awaits you in proclaiming – in a way that is convincing and supportive – the beauty and splendour of true conjugal love. As Shepherds you must be watchful that the word of God in its fullness is faithfully taught. When necessary, you must take the "appropriate measures to ensure that the faithful are guarded from every doctrine and theory contrary to it" (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 116). Your priests should be helped to give their firm assent to this teaching and to commit themselves to forming the consciences of those entrusted to their pastoral care according to the full truth of the Gospel.

7. While recognizing that we are "men who will have to give account" of our pastoral stewardship to the Father (Cf. Hebr. 13: 17), we can take comfort in the fact that *Christ has called us his "friends"* (Cf. Jn. 15: 14). Let us place our episcopal ministry in the hands of Mary, Mother of Mercy, and commend to her maternal care all the priests, Religious and laity of your Dioceses. *I pray that the Spirit who renews the face of the earth* (Cf. Ps. 104(103): 30), *will illumine with the splendour of divine truth the mind and heart of America!* With my Apostolic Blessing.

