



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, 21 September 1993

Your Eminence,

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel" (Phil. 1: 3-5). With these sentiments of the Apostle Paul I cordially welcome you – *the Bishops of New England*. Paul's journeys to Jerusalem to meet Peter (Cf. Gal. 1: 18; 2: 1-2) provide the first example of those fraternal encounters which have become the Bishops' visits "*ad Limina Apostolorum*". We have conversed and prayed together as brothers in the Lord. Thus, these meetings foster the bonds of hierarchical and affective communion between us. Through them we are mutually strengthened – in the words of "Lumen gentium" – "by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to attain to fullness in unity" (Lumen Gentium, 13).

Today *I wish to thank the whole Church in the United States*, particularly the Archdiocese of Denver, for hosting the Eighth "World Youth Day". My visit in the Rocky Mountain State, where hundreds of thousands of young people gathered to profess their faith in Christ, experience communion with the Church and commit themselves to the pressing task of the new evangelization, was a time of great joy and renewed hope. I was moved many times by the young people's obvious and joyous love of God and of the Church. They told us their stories of suffering for the Gospel, of conquering seemingly overwhelming obstacles with divine help, and of their anguish before a world tormented by despair, cynicism and conflict. I came away from Denver praising God who reveals to the young the secrets of his Kingdom (Cf. Mt. 11: 25). All of us, Bishops of the Church, should reflect anew on our ministry to young people and on our responsibility to present to them the full truth of Christ and his Church.

The young people gathered at Denver certainly deserved to hear the words of Saint Paul which I used at the closing Mass: "I have great confidence in you, I have great pride in you; I am filled with encouragement, I am overflowing with joy" (2Cor. 7: 4). From the very many letters I have received, I share with you what one young woman, who is about to begin her university studies, wrote to me. She says: "We were asleep in the arms of Christ: it was (the "World Youth Day" which.) awakened us from our nightmares of self-indulgence and loneliness, to look up into the eyes of that God-Man who is our way, our truth and our life". In such words we Pastors must read a *continuing challenge to accompany young people in their pilgrimage of faith*, the journey they make in response to God's grace at work in their hearts, *that journey which from time to time needs moments of special intensity*, such as pilgrimages, prayer-meetings, retreats. It requires time and attention to listen to young people, to teach them, to encourage them. The apostolate to youth must be a priority of the Church at the approach of the third millennium.

2. *We cannot ignore the deep desires that are stirring in people's hearts today.* In spite of negative signs, many hunger for an authentic and challenging spirituality. There is "a fresh discovery of God in his transcendent reality as the infinite Spirit" (John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 2), and young people especially are looking for a solid foundation upon which to build their lives. The youth of America look to you to lead them to Christ, who is the only "existentially adequate response to the desire in every human heart for goodness, truth and life" (John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 24). Allow me to repeat what I said to the Bishops last month in Denver: "Are we always ready to help the young people discover the transcendent elements of the Christian life? From our words and actions do they conclude that the Church is indeed a mystery of communion with the Blessed Trinity, and not just a human institution with temporal aims?" (John Paul II, *Mass with the Bishops gathered in the Cathedral of Denver*, 2, 13 August 1993).

3. Among the concrete lessons of the "World Youth Day" we should not overlook young people's *capacity and desire for prayer*. They expect their pastors to be *teachers of truly Christian prayer*, which leads to sharing in the Son's own filial dialogue with the Father in accordance with Saint Paul's marvelous expression in the Letter to the Galatians: "because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal. 4: 6). Prayer is not one occupation among many, but is at the center of our life in Christ. It turns our attention away from ourselves and directs it to the Lord. *Prayer fills the mind with truth and gives hope to the heart*. Without a deep experience of prayer, growth in the moral life will be shallow. The authentic renewal of your Dioceses calls for *the apostolate of prayer* rooted in faith, strengthened by the sacramental and liturgical life, and active in charity (Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2558).

4. Hand in hand with nurturing the spiritual vitality of young men and women goes the challenge of presenting them with "the fullness of the truth which God has enabled us to know about himself" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 5). It is clear that the controversies and dissent of past decades are of little interest to them. *They are not inspired by a Gospel which is diluted, disguised or made*

to seem effortless. Every effort should be made to guarantee that catechetical and religious education programs, Catholic schools and Institutions of higher learning and, in particular, the preaching ministry of the Church, present *serenely and convincingly – but without embarrassment or compromise – the whole treasury of Church teaching.*

Only by forming young people in genuine Catholic spirituality and in the fullness of Catholic doctrine can you help them to assume fully their role and responsibilities in the Church, something of which they themselves are very conscious. With their enthusiasm and boundless energy, they should be encouraged to be *"leading characters in evangelization and participants in the renewal of society"* (John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 46). Not just evangelized, they are themselves evangelizers who bring the Gospel to their peers, including those alienated from the Church and those who have not yet heard the Good news. Likewise, many young people have an enormous potential for generosity, dedication and commitment and are attracted to forms of volunteer work, especially in serving the needy. With them, the leaders of the Church in the United States should continue to explore ways in which their talents and desire to participate in the Church's mission can be more fully realized. The ordinary means of "youth ministry", which focus on the parish, should continue so that the young are not isolated from the broader community. But, as your own experience tells you, it is often helpful to supplement this through associations, movements, special centres and groups that meet their particular needs (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 37).

5. As the increased interest in ethical questions and the growing debate about "values" in American life demonstrate, the need for moral formation through the work of families, schools and other institutions is being felt more and more. Given this situation, Pastors have many opportunities to provide leadership in the area of moral development, bearing as they do the truth of Christ, the wisdom of God (Cf. 1Cor. 1: 24). who sets us free (Cf. Jn. 8: 32). Yet direction and vision will only be effective when there is a consensus about how to live. The Church has that vision of life's meaning and purpose in the "one faith" of the Gospel. Is it not true that the question asked by the young man in the Gospel, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mk. 10: 17) is being asked of us today with an urgency that demands our close attention?

The needed renewal of social and political life can only take place if the intrinsic connection between *faith and morality* is clear. Young Catholics are sensitive to the need for consistency between faith professed and faith lived. They demand a clear sense of what it means in practice to be Catholic. Pastors ought to preach with a new confidence and zeal the "answer" about morality that the Lord has entrusted to his Church. Among the themes of this Good News is the essential bond between human freedom and truth, in the sense that a freedom which refuses to be bound to truth loses its foundation (Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 41). Young people sense – perhaps sometimes without knowing why – that religious, moral and cultural relativism does not lead to happiness and that freedom without truth is illusory.

One of the key pastoral problems facing us is the widespread misunderstanding of the role of

conscience, whereby individual conscience and experience are exalted above or against Church teaching. The young women and men of America, and indeed of the whole Western world, who are often victims of educational theories which propose that they "create" their own values and that "feeling good about themselves" is a primary guiding moral principle, are asking to be led out of this moral confusion. All those who teach in the name of the Church should fearlessly honour the dignity of the *moral conscience* as the sanctuary in which the voice of God is heard (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 16); but with equal care they should proclaim, in opposition to all subjectivism, that conscience is not a tribunal which creates the good, but must be formed in the light of universal and objective norms of morality. Clear teaching on these matters is also an essential part of the necessary return to the practice of the Sacrament of Penance. The thousands of Confessions heard by the priests present in Denver show that the young people know the value of this Sacrament, in spite of the widespread crisis affecting it (John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 28).

6. Clear teaching on all such matters is liberating because it presents the true meaning of discipleship: Christ calls his followers to friendship with him (Cf. Jn. 15: 15). In fact, *the personal following of Christ is the essential foundation of Christian morality*. The "obedience of faith" (Rom. 16: 26) is both an intellectual assent to doctrine as well as a life commitment which draws us into ever more perfect union with Christ himself. The Church must always be careful not to reduce "the word of truth" (Col. 1: 5) to an abstract code of ethics and morality, or a treatise of rules for good behavior. The preaching of Christian morality, so closely linked to the new evangelization, must not empty the Cross of Christ of its power (Cf. 1Cor. 1: 17).

I am confident that the Bishops of the United States will continue to give special pastoral attention to young people, in whom the Church recognizes her own divinely given youthfulness as the Bride of Christ (Cf. Eph. 5: 22-23). I entrust all the priests, Religious and faithful of your Dioceses to Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, that she may remain with you in prayer (Cf. Acts. 1: 14), and make you messengers of hope and bearers of life to the world. With affection in the Lord I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and all the faithful of New England.

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