



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE PHILIPPINES,
PAPUA NEW GUINEA, AUSTRALIA AND SRI LANKA

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF SRI LANKA**

*Colombo, Sri Lanka
Saturday, 21 January 1995*

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. My brief visit to Sri Lanka offers us this occasion to experience anew "*the bonds of unity, charity and peace*" which, since apostolic times, have constituted the relationship of the Church's Bishops among themselves and with the Bishop of Rome (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 22). Our meeting is taking place in the atmosphere of joy brought to us by the *Beatification of the Apostle of Sri Lanka, Father Joseph Vaz*. Let us continue to give thanks to God through whom we too "have obtained access to this grace in which we stand" (Rom. 5:2).

By the gift of the Holy Spirit received in episcopal ordination, you were made "successors of the Apostles, who together with the Successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ and the visible Head of the whole Church, govern the house of the living God" (*Lumen Gentium*, 18). This happy occasion for the Church in your country is also an occasion for you the Bishops to recommit yourselves to the work of *teaching, sanctifying and guiding that part of God's people entrusted to your ministry*. That ministry involves a grave personal responsibility to be guardians and authentic teachers of the Catholic faith (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25). The exercise of your apostolic authority in ensuring sound teaching in matters of faith and morals and fostering observance of Church discipline is therefore an essential part of your ministry, even when it constitutes the "burden" which the Lord lays on your shoulders (cf. Mt. 20:12). In the name of Jesus Christ "the chief Shepherd" (1 Pt. 5:4), I wish to encourage you to intensify your spiritual leadership and to be fully united among yourselves, so

that you may be found faithful as "overseers, caring for the Church of God" (cf. Acts 20:28).

2. Your responsibility for building up Christ's Body demands that you should know the flock entrusted to you (cf. Jn. 10:14). The faithful must be able to see their Bishop as "a true father who excels in the spirit of love and solicitude for all" (*Christus Dominus*, 16). They rightly look to you to guard and defend their faith, to shepherd them and strengthen them in the midst of the challenges and trials of daily Christian living. Take *Blessed Joseph Vaz as the model of your ministry*. He travelled the length and breadth of this Island visiting the missions he had instituted. In this way he was able to guide, correct and confirm in the faith the "pusillus grex" which was struggling to survive in the midst of persecution.

There is no more effective way for you to show forth the Lord's concern and his infinite love than to continue to meet your people personally on the occasion of your *regular pastoral visits to parishes and other institutions*. Your visitations will also foster closer contact and a spirit of trusting dialogue between yourselves and the clergy, Religious and laity. The enduring spiritual fruitfulness of your personal presence in the midst of your priests and faithful cannot be overestimated.

3. The outstanding challenge facing the Pastors of the Church in Sri Lanka is *the renewal of evangelical zeal in all the baptized*. The genuine renewal of the Church depends in the first place on the response of her members to the *universal call to holiness*. The witness of a joyful spiritual life is the best response both to secularization and to the spread of new religious sects, altogether distinct from the Catholic Church in their doctrines and methods. A spirituality based on God's revealed word, nourished by the sacraments and exercised in all the Christian virtues, in no way detracts from attention to the world and the needs of the human family. Rather, as the Second Vatican Council states: "By this holiness a more human way of life is promoted even in this earthly society" (*Lumen Gentium*, 40). It is my hope that the forthcoming *National Pastoral Convention*, by providing a clear picture of the state of the Church in each Diocese, will be able to indicate the priorities which the Catholic community should set itself in the coming years.

4. One concern which never changes is that of *the spiritual and intellectual life of priests*, "so that they can live holy and pious lives and fulfil their ministry faithfully and fruitfully" (*Christus Dominus*, 16). The theme is vast and goes beyond the scope of these brief reflections. I would merely recall that since the Council there have been numerous interventions of the Magisterium, culminating in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "*Pastores Dabo Vobis*" and recent documents of the Congregation for the Clergy. Continuing theological formation, and the permanent spiritual growth of priests, are urgent pastoral priorities for every diocesan Bishop. As Successors of the Apostles, you are likewise called to have a *solicitude for the mission "ad gentes"*, acknowledging your responsibility for the Gospel outside the boundaries of your own Dioceses and nation, and sharing your resources generously with others (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 38).

Moreover, *worthy candidates for the priesthood* need to be encouraged, selected and trained;

trained above all to a life of prayer and of willing self-oblation in union with Christ the High Priest. While recognizing the importance of the duties entrusted to Seminary authorities, the Bishop remains "the first representative of Christ in seminary formation" (John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 65), and this serious personal responsibility, while it needs to be shared, must never be completely delegated. I confirm you in all that you are doing to ensure that your Seminaries respond to the clear guidelines contained in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "*Pastores Dabo Vobis*", which resulted from the 1990 Synod of Bishops.

5. There is no need for me to speak at length about the place which *Religious Communities* have in the life of the Church in Sri Lanka. I simply wish to invite you to exercise your ministry in their regard with all the love and concern of genuine Pastors of souls. Help Religious to preserve and develop their specific charism, which is God's gift to each particular Church in which they exercise their apostolate. Encourage them to be always outstanding in their example of fidelity to the evangelical counsels according to the mind of the Church, whose teaching and laws on the consecrated life can certainly never be a hindrance to the prophetic impulse which lies at the heart of every Religious vocation. In particular, I ask you to show fatherly concern and support for the many *Religious Sisters, dedicated women who live their motherhood in the Spirit* through total self-giving love for Christ the Spouse, whom they meet especially in the sick, the handicapped, the abandoned, the young, the elderly, and, in general, people on the edges of society (cf. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 21).

I would also invite you to continue to meet with the Conference of Major Superiors in a spirit of unbounded love for Christ's Church, in order to better coordinate the participation of Religious in the pastoral life of each Diocese and of the country as a whole, and to resolve matters of mutual concern.

6. *The development of an ever more effective lay apostolate* requires not only that priests and Religious work closely with the laity but also that they encourage and help them to assume fully their specific task of renewing the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel. There is a need for continuing serious study of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "*Christifideles Laici*" in order to foster the leadership of the laity in the spheres of business, education and civic life where they are present and competent. Likewise, every effort to teach and spread the *Church's social doctrine* should be encouraged, so that the laity will have the vision and knowledge needed to face the many *moral and ethical questions raised by an increasingly complex and technologically-based society*.

7. Your efforts to uphold spiritual values and to apply the *light of the Gospel* to issues affecting the life of your nation are an immense *service to the whole of Sri Lankan society*. In the face of the ethnic tensions and conflicts affecting your country and the threats to human dignity and rights, you have a duty to speak out and to encourage all men and women of good will to seek the triumph of justice, truth and harmony.

In your multi-religious society, *interreligious dialogue remains an important commitment for the Church at every level*. Continue to "build bridges" of understanding and cooperation with the followers of other religions, especially in order to promote respect for human life and concern for honesty and integrity in all areas of socio-economic and political life, as well as in working for the cause of peace and solidarity between individuals and social groups. In this way too, the Church will bear effective witness to the Kingdom of God and the truth of the Gospel.

8. Dear Brother Bishops: as the Church in Sri Lanka moves towards the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, go forward with full trust in God's Providence and build upon the pastoral achievements already attained. Support one another in fraternal solidarity and continue to work closely together in meeting your many pastoral challenges.

I will "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).

Commending you and your people to the protection and intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, whom you love so dearly, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and peace in Christ our Saviour.