



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE Bishops' Conference of Việt Nam
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

Saturday, 14 December 1996

Your Eminence,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. With great joy *I welcome you for your ad limina visit*, you who are in charge of the pastoral care of the People of God in Việt Nam. You have come to the tombs of Peter and Paul to strengthen the awareness of your responsibility as successors of the Apostles, and to feel more intensely your communion with the Bishop of Rome. In fact the *ad limina* visits have a particular importance in the Church's life "for they constitute as it were the summit of relations between the Pastors of each particular Church and the Roman Pontiff" (*Pastor Bonus*, 29). They highlight the catholicity of the Church and the unity of the Episcopal College in a remarkable way. *I warmly thank* Cardinal Paul Joseph Pham Dinh Tung, Archbishop of Hanoi and President of your Episcopal Conference, for the moving words he has addressed me on your behalf, thereby showing your communities' fidelity to the Successor of Peter. I greet with particular affection *the Bishops of your country who were unable to come with you*. I would have really liked to meet all the Bishops, to express to them all my affection for them and their diocesan communities, and to assure them of the interest with which I follow their work in each of their Dioceses. The *ad limina* visit of an Episcopal Conference in its entirety is not only a visible demonstration of the spiritual links which bind the particular Churches to the universal Church, it is also a sign that religious freedom is respected in a country. I express my solidarity with these Bishops and my profound communion in their apostolic ministry at the service of the people entrusted to them. Through you, I also join the Vietnamese faithful who courageously witness to Christ in your land or outside the country, as well as to *all the people of Việt Nam* whom I assure of my warm friendship.

2. Since the arrival of the Gospel in the 16th century, the Church in your country has *undergone many trials*. Several times she has suffered persecution for the cause of faith in Christ the Redeemer. Marked by the holiness and martyrdom of so many of her children, she has become a Church glorified by their zeal in the service of God and their brothers and sisters. And I would like

to recall here the heroic figure of the 117 martyrs whom I had the privilege of canonizing in 1988. This witness, which the sons and daughters of your country have given to Christ through love of God and their brethren, has created a special link between the Christian community and all the Vietnamese. Fully sharing the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 1), the Church has demonstrated that she is deeply rooted there. If down the centuries misunderstandings have sometimes arisen between the Church and the civil community, it must be reasserted that *Catholics are loyal members of the nation*: today, as in the past, they contribute to the country's social progress and show a regard for the common good which is no less than that of the other citizens. Although she is a small flock, the Church wants to be fully present among the realities of the country, with her own vocation. She is on the way with all the members of the nation, for she shares the same history and common successes and trials. She does not act in a spirit of rivalry or through seeking her own interest, but aspires to live in communion and harmony with all.

The Church's mission is to *transmit a message of life and love* by concrete actions for human dignity, for a better life, in a spirit of compassion for the poorest and most deprived. With humility and in collaboration with the other members of the nation, Catholics take part in the renewal and transformation of human realities. Living her vocation of unity and service for all the people, the Church recognizes and shares the great richness of Vietnamese culture and its human and spiritual values; and she hopes to deepen relations of brotherhood, dialogue and collaboration with all.

3. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I give thanks to God for the *zeal and generosity you manifest*, despite great difficulties in the roles of teaching, governing and sanctifying which have been entrusted to you in Christ's name. I especially encourage you fervently to pursue your mission of preaching the Gospel which is the Bishop's first responsibility. "The Bishops are heralds of the faith, who draw new disciples to Christ; they are authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach the faith to the people assigned to them, the faith which is destined to inform their thinking and direct their conduct; and under the light of the Holy Spirit they make that faith shine forth, drawing from the storehouse of revelation new things and old (cf. Mt 13:52); they make it bear fruit and with watchfulness they ward off whatever errors threaten their flock (cf. 2 Tm 4:14)" (*Lumen gentium*, 25). The primary object of their proclamation is Christ, in whom is accomplished full and authentic liberation from evil, sin and death, and in whom God himself communicates his own life to us. It is this Good News which all men have a right to know and the *Bishops are its principal missionaries*.

The *Church's prophetic mission* is further fulfilled when, in the light of the Gospel, she makes a courageous interpretation of the great questions posed in her time, and when she intervenes notably on behalf of the poor, the sick, the marginalized and the young. It is her vocation to strive to promote the civilization of love, fraternity, solidarity, unity, justice and peace. The apostolic responsibility you have received makes you "witnesses of Christ to all men. [Bishops] should not

limit themselves to those who already acknowledge the Prince of Pastors, but should also devote their energies wholeheartedly to those who ... have no knowledge of the Gospel of Christ and of his saving mercy" (*Christus Dominus*, 11) The Church's mission is universal; it is addressed to all men.

4. At the time when we are preparing to enter the third millennium, *the perspective of the Great Jubilee* offers the Church a happy opportunity of "reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 4). We are invited to *turn our gaze to the future*, knowing that the future belongs to Christ who already manifests himself to us. To welcome a new springtime of Christian life, *the Church in Viêt Nam is called to a pastoral, missionary and spiritual renewal*, in order to enter the third millennium with the courage of Christ's disciples. The apostolic life must ceaselessly be reformed to respond to the necessities of the times and the needs of the people. Of course, the Church "cannot cross the threshold of the new millennium without encouraging her children to purify themselves, through repentance of past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency and slowness to act. Acknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage which helps us to strengthen our faith, which alerts us to face today's temptations and challenges and prepares us to meet them" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, 33). Each believer is invited to *conversion of heart and the acceptance of Christ* in his own life. "It is ever more urgent that today all Christians take up again the way of Gospel renewal, welcoming in a spirit of generosity the invitation expressed by the Apostle Peter 'to be holy in all conduct' (1 Pt 1:15)" (*Christifideles laici*, 16).

But the Church is also invited to *give thanks to God* for the admirable work accomplished under the action of the Holy Spirit, despite the poverty of her means. She desires to offer everyone the message of life and love which was bequeathed to her by her Lord, Jesus Christ. "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6), the Apostle Peter said at the gate of the temple.

In the *Second Vatican Council* the Church finds *a precious source for the renewal of her whole life*. "The best preparation for the new millennium, therefore, can only be expressed in a renewed commitment to apply, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole Church" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, 20). I therefore urge you to draw inspiration there for your pastoral work.

5. Your Eminence, you have paid tribute to *the living faith of the laity* of your Dioceses. I am pleased to acknowledge here the courage and zeal of your faithful who have undergone so many trials without failing in their adherence to Christ. I hope that each one of them "will always be keenly aware that he is one of the 'members of the Church', to whom is given a unique and irreplaceable task which he cannot delegate, a task to be fulfilled for the good of all. In this perspective, the Council's insistence on the absolute necessity of an apostolate exercised by the individual, takes on its full meaning" (*Christifideles laici*, 28). I understand the difficulties deriving

from the limitations imposed on those who have received from Christ the responsibility for organizing the apostolate of the faithful and on those who want to dedicate themselves to the apostolate. However, they must not be discouraged: on the contrary it is necessary to foster the responsibility of lay people who — as the Council recalls—should be as active in the Church as they are in the world (cf. *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 9). It is their duty to *take part actively in the life of the Church and in her mission to proclaim the Gospel* among their brothers and sisters. They are called to discover and to live deeply their vocation and their personal and community mission. Wherever fraternal communion among the followers of Christ has weakened, the credibility of their witness and mission is weakened.

I invite lay people to share ever more generously the gifts they have received, by dedicating themselves to the guidance of the parishes, giving themselves to catechesis and the education of young people, taking part in the spiritual movements or charitable works. Each baptized person must take his part of responsibility and service in the Church. For this, it is necessary that the *human, spiritual and doctrinal formation of the laity* has a recognized place in pastoral programmes. Thus ecclesial communities can be built that are increasingly fraternal and united, founded on deep communion with Christ, the one Saviour of the world. They can effectively serve unity among all men.

6. I would now like cordially to greet *the priests*, your immediate co-workers in the service of the People of God. I know with what zeal and willingness, at the price of so much fatigue, they give themselves to their ministry. May God strengthen them in their vocation as the builders of Christian communities in full union with their Bishops and give them hope at difficult moments. I encourage them especially to keep the person of Jesus Christ at the centre of their life, to conform to him in everything, and to witness to a life renewed in him! “Contact with the representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. He is a witness to the experience of God, and must be able to say with the Apostles: ‘that which we have looked upon ... concerning the word of life, ... we proclaim also to you’ (1 Jn 1:1-3)” (*Redemptoris missio*, 91).

I also join in my thoughts and prayers *those who are preparing for the priesthood* and who are fervently awaiting the day when they will receive their ordination which will make them participate in the ministry of Christ the Priest, to build his Church. I hope that conditions will rapidly be created which will enable you to open the seminaries that are necessary and to accept in them all the young men who generously aspire to consecrate their life to the service of the Church and their brothers and sisters.

With regard to the *institutes of consecrated life*, I am aware of the activity which their members discreetly but efficiently carry out in the various areas of social assistance, such as hospitals, leprosariums, orphanages, kindergartens, homes for the handicapped: they share the life of their people and give a marvellous Christian and Gospel witness. That is why it would be constructive and appreciated by the people if novitiates could be opened to form these humble servants of the

common good. I invite all the members of these institutes to deepen their vocation in its triple dimension of consecration, communion and mission, and I hope that they will discover fresh enthusiasm to face in a spiritual and apostolic manner the new challenges that are emerging today in society (cf. *Vita consecrata*, 13).

7. On the occasion of the Great Jubilee, I have wished to convoke a *Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops*, “in order to illustrate and explain more fully the truth that Christ is the one Mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of the world” (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, 38). This Synod would like to evaluate the circumstances in which the peoples and cultures of your continent currently find themselves and to prepare the Church to fulfil her mission of love and service better. The preparation and celebration of this continental assembly is an opportunity to walk together with the universal Church towards the third millennium, in the footsteps of Christ, in the Spirit. It is therefore fortunate that the Church in Viêt Nam can give the whole Church the contribution of her long and rich experience of Gospel witness, lived sometimes to the point of heroism by her Pastors and faithful. The pastoral lines that will emerge from this assembly will be reference points to strengthen the faith and give a new apostolic impetus to the communities.

8. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, as I end this fraternal meeting, I would like *to encourage you*, as well as your confrères, to continue your apostolic ministry in the hope given us by the Birth of the Lord which we will be celebrating in a few days. God wanted to manifest himself as “*the Emmanuel*”, the One who dwells among us, *yesterday, today and forever*. May he be your strength and your light! May he help you maintain unity in the particular Churches entrusted to your care! May he reinforce the unity of the Bishops with the Pope, and among themselves, and the unity of the priests with the Pope and with their Pastors, in the communion of the universal Church!

I commend you to the motherly protection of the Mother of Christ, Our Lady of La-Vang, of whom you will be celebrating in August 1998, the second centenary of the apparitions. May she be for you and for your faithful a guide on the path that leads to the Lord Jesus her Son! To each one of you, to the Bishops who have been unable to join us, to the priests, to the religious, and to all the lay people of Viêt Nam, in your country or living outside it, I affectionately grant my *Apostolic Blessing*.

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