



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
OF THE PHILIPPINES ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 27 September 1996

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. It is always a great pleasure for me to meet the *Bishops of the Philippines*, especially on the occasion of your *ad limina* visits, when you bring to the Successor of Peter the joyful testimony of your people's faith and of their union with this Apostolic See. I greet you - the first group in this series of visits - and, through you, all the faithful of the Philippines: "the favor of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (Gal. 6:18).

Seeing you here, I think back to the marvelous experience of the World Youth Day in Manila, in January last year. It was not just the number of Filipino young people present with such fervor that was so impressive. What remains impressed on my memory is above all the vitality, conviction and enthusiasm with which the Filipino Catholic community as a whole professed its love of God and of his Church. From the moment of my arrival on Filipino soil I wished to center my preaching on "*the Good News of God's love and mercy* - the word of truth, justice and peace which alone can inspire a life worthy of God's sons and daughters", and on "*the special vocation*" of the church in the Philippines "*to bear witness to the Gospel in the heart of Asia*" (John Paul II, [*Address at the Welcoming Ceremony in Manila*](#), 4 [12 Jan. 1995])! By word and attitude, Filipino Catholics showed that they were ready to respond to this vocation in answer to God's love; and that they would do so with "new light, new love, new commitment to meeting the great needs of humanity" (*Ibid.*)?

2. Yes, there is no doubt that *the Church in your land, throughout your Islands, is vibrant, strong and full of life*. Like the young bride of the Book of Revelation, she has full confidence in the steadfast fidelity of her Lord and Savior; she holds forth the promise of love and life: "Let us rejoice

and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7). What are the signs of this youthful spiritual vitality? In the first place, the faithful ministry of your beloved co-workers, *the priests*, committed to realizing their priestly identity in the generous service of God's people. They draw strength from their sacramental configuration to Christ, the great High Priest (Heb. 4:14), whose friendship they experience in personal prayer and liturgical celebration. Your *seminarians* too are a sure sign of hope for the future. They look to you for that solid formation that will lead them to "mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). And what about the numerous *men and women religious*? Their irreplaceable contribution to the evangelization of the Philippines is an essential part of your history, and continues today in your particular Churches' efforts to present the true face of Christ in every form of ecclesial service. And a particular sign of vitality is the glowing participation of the *laity* in the Church's mission. More and more you can count on their active and fruitful collaboration in responding to the magnitude of the challenges of the new evangelization and of integral human development, which form the framework of the Church's action as she enters the next Christian millennium.

Since you, the Bishops, have a unique and central role in meeting these challenges, I wish to invite you to be serenely confident in the Lord, the Chief Shepherd (1 Pt. 5:4), who never abandons his flock. No matter what difficulties arise as times and circumstances change, he is present with his grace and the power of his word to guide and sustain your ministry and service. Indeed, the Lord "continually distributes in his body, that is in the Church, gifts of ministries through which, by his power, we serve each other unto salvation so that, carrying out the truth in love, we may through all things grow up into him who is our head" (*Lumen Gentium*, 7). It is your responsibility as Bishops to discern and judge the gifts and charisms, but above all to encourage their growth for the benefit of all, and to harmonize them in a great chorus of praise to God. This is the truest sense of *the communion of discipleship* which the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines posited as a goal for your pastoral planning and activity.

3. With your brother Bishops in the rest of the country, and responding to the call of the Second Vatican Council and your own Second Plenary Council, you are working to communicate *a greater sense of community and mission*, an awareness among the faithful of belonging to and sharing in a reality, the Body of Christ, which transcends them, and yet embraces them and depends on them and makes them responsible for the present and future of that same reality. In this communion, Bishops are, as it were, the elder brothers. To us, the Successors of the Apostles, has been principally entrusted the task of evangelizing and teaching so that all may attain to salvation by faith, Baptism, and the fulfillment of the commandments (cf. *ibid.*, 24). We are called to exercise this role and this authority, not with pride or relying on our own strength, but with love and humble obedience to the truth, as "servants of the Lord's servants" (St. Augustine, *Letter 217: PL 33, 378*). In fact, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, "that duty, which the Lord committed to the shepherds of his people, is a true service, and in sacred literature is significantly called *diakonia* or ministry" (*Lumen Gentium*, 24). Your *ad limina* visit is an excellent occasion for

you to reaffirm and strengthen that inner commitment and ready availability which daily inspire your prayer, your activity and your efforts on behalf of the Dioceses entrusted to you. You know that the way you yourselves respond to God's grace is not without effect on the progress of God's people "made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (St. Cyprian, *De Oratione Dominica*, 23: PL 4, 553; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 4).

The conciliar Constitution « *Lumen Gentium* » places the bond between Pastors and faithful on a profound theological footing, as part of the divine plan for the Church, as an expression of *their common dignity deriving from their rebirth in Christ*. "The distinction which the Lord made between sacred ministers and the rest of the people of God entails a unifying purpose, since pastors and the other faithful are bound to each other by a mutual need the very diversity of graces, ministries, and works gathers the children of God into one, because all these things are the work of one and the same Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:11)" (*Lumen Gentium*, 32). You, the Pastors, are saying to the faithful: yes, we have received from Christ a ministry of spiritual leadership, of teaching and of guidance, but this too is a service to the whole body; ours is "a hierarchy of service, and not of Christian excellence" (*Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, 96). In other words, it is as if you were telling the faithful: no one has a merely passive role; the contribution of every individual and family is essential; Christ needs every one of you. And, with the help of the priests, religious and committed lay people, you are directing your pastoral efforts to *turning the evangelical concept of communion into a reality of everyday life in each local community*.

4. In this great pastoral effort, one of your priorities is the spreading and strengthening of *basic ecclesial communities*, as well as the formation of their leaders. You are well aware of the great potential of such communities, but also of the challenge which they entail. A fundamental text of the Magisterium in this regard remains the Apostolic Exhortation "*Evangelii Nuntiandi*" of my predecessor Pope Paul VI, to which I invite you to return from time to time in order to be reminded that this pastoral approach is valid only in so far as such groups "come together within the Church in order to unite themselves to the Church and to cause the Church to grow ... having solidarity with her life, being nourished by her teaching and united with her pastors" (*Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, 58).

By creating a deeper bond between their members, a bond sustained above all by the Church's sacramental and liturgical life, these fraternal communities become the leaven of Christian life, of care for the poor, destitute and marginalized, and of commitment to social transformation. You see these communities as a way to teach the tenets of the faith through *a catechesis that is closely related to real life situations*, and therefore as an effective means of safeguarding the community from the inroads of fundamentalism. They also serve to channel popular devotions in the right direction, by giving them a solid biblical and theological foundation. In many of your Dioceses you have seen that through the basic ecclesial communities the teachings of the Magisterium, the pastoral letters of the Bishops' Conference and the documents of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines are more easily brought to the grassroots level of the parish communities.

5. As Pope Paul VI recognized, such communities will become a hope for the universal Church to the extent that they seek their nourishment in the word of God, do not allow themselves to be ensnared by political polarization or fashionable ideologies, and avoid giving in to the temptation of systematic protest and a hypercritical attitude, under the pretext of authenticity. It is essential that they remain firmly attached to the local Church to which they belong, and to the universal Church, thus avoiding the danger of becoming closed within themselves, to the exclusion of other ecclesial realities.

If the experience of basic ecclesial communities proves successful in fostering a deeper, more fraternal and more practical witness of Christian life and solidarity, then a new image of the Church will appear, the image of an active and responsible community which truly reflects the model offered by the early Christians of Jerusalem as described in the Acts of the Apostles. At the same time, pastoral activity, *especially in parishes*, cannot overlook the majority who do not participate, and those who are lax or have fallen away. The Church is also the home of the sinner, of those who doubt or need encouragement. She must never become the exclusive domain of an elite of committed members.

6. It is the duty of the Church's Pastors to correct centrifugal tendencies leading to fragmentation or division. Indeed, within the Christian community the Bishop is the center of unity, a fact illustrated by these striking words of the Council: "For their part, the faithful must cling to their Bishop, as the Church does to Christ, and Jesus Christ to the Father, so that everything may harmonize in unity and bring forth abundant fruit unto the glory of God". In every way possible the Bishop must work for union among the priests, religious and laity, a harmony based above all on principles of faith and manifested most particularly in the unity of God's people around the Altar of Sacrifice. He needs to instruct, watch over and defend the portion of the Lord's inheritance committed to his care, knowing that peace is the result also of a thorough and far-reaching program of catechesis which *enlightens and strengthens consciences for the responsible choices which have to be made also in civil and social matters*.

All the Church's members, as active and responsible citizens, are called to be builders of peace in society as a whole, and this task is all the more pressing where religious differences or cultural and social conditions generate tensions. Some of your Dioceses are not immune to a certain instability and violence. Everywhere the Church prays and works for *social peace founded primarily on respect for people's fundamental rights, beginning with the cardinal right to freedom of religion and conscience*. By its very nature, peace-making calls for sincere and constructive dialogue on the part of everyone involved. Peace can only be achieved if the integral good of the whole of society is everyone's overriding goal. When I visited the Southern Philippines in 1981, I had the pleasure of meeting members of the Muslim community and of encouraging the dialogue which was already taking place and which, in spite of difficulties, has continued. What was said then is just as true today: "Society cannot bring citizens the happiness that they expect from it unless society itself is built upon dialogue. Dialogue in turn is built upon trust, and *trust*

presupposes not only justice but mercy". As you yourselves have written: "The journey to peace is the journey of people of different faiths, people who pray to the same almighty God, who for the sake of peace creates in our hearts the attitudes of mutual respect and trust and love for justice, truth and freedom, which are the pillars of a house of peace". May God bless your efforts to build that house of peace in your own region!

7. In Manila in 1995, I urged the Bishops to bring *the liberating power of the Gospel* to bear on the pastoral challenges facing you. It is in fact "the obedience of faith for the sake of Christ's name" which is the definitive and ultimate answer to man's problems and the fulfillment of his aspirations. In our preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, next year will be devoted to *reflection on Christ*, the Word of God, made man by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is my ardent prayer that you will lead the people of God to "a renewed appreciation of Christ, Savior and Proclaimer of the Gospel a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation. As you come ever closer to Christ, you and your people will drink at the true wellspring of salvation and hope. "Straining forward to what lies ahead ... press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus". May the Lord himself guide you and sustain you. May the Mother of the Redeemer intercede for the beloved Filipino people.

With my Apostolic Blessing.

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