



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF SCANDINAVIA ON  
THEIR "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM VISIT"**

*Saturday, 19 April 1997*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. With great joy I welcome to "Peter's house" you who are entrusted with the pastoral care of the People of God in Scandinavia. Your *ad limina* visit brings you to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, to strengthen the awareness of your responsibility as successors of the Apostles and to experience your communion with the Bishop of Rome even more intensely. In fact, *ad limina* visits have a particular significance in the Church's life: "They are as it were the high point of the relationship of the Pastors of each particular Church with the Roman Pontiff" (*Pastor Bonus*, n. 29). I cordially thank Bishop Paul Verschuren of Helsinki, President of your Episcopal Conference, for the moving words he has addressed to me on behalf of you all. They were not only informative but also expressed the unity and fidelity which unites "the far North" to Rome.

I have a vivid memory of the various meetings which, together with you, I have had with your believers. I am thinking of my [Pastoral Visit in 1989](#) and of the 600th anniversary of the canonization of St Birgitta of Sweden, an event which gave you the opportunity two years later to make a pilgrimage to Rome, "centrum unitatis" (Cyprian, *De unitate*, n. 7), the centre of unity. During your last *ad limina* visit, which took place five years ago, we reflected together on the mandate and tasks associated with your episcopal office. Today I invite you to return to the reflections of that time and continue them from the standpoint of the idea and reality of the Church as you encounter them in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, how you help to build her up as "servants of Christ" (cf. Rom 1:1), and how you guide her, "being examples to the flock" (1 Pt 5:3). The days you spend in Rome will not only serve for discussion, but will also be the opportunity for a pilgrimage and profession of faith: a profession of the Church, founded by Jesus

Christ on Peter, the rock, “the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the Bishops and of the whole company of the faithful” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23).

2. *I believe the Church.* In the Apostles' Creed we profess the Church but we do not say that we believe in the Church, so that we do not confuse God and his Church but attribute clearly to God's goodness all the gifts he has bestowed on his Church (cf. *Roman Catechism*, I, art. 9, nn. 1, 10, 22). Thus our profession of the Church depends on the article of faith concerning the Holy Spirit. As the Fathers say, the Church is the place where “the Spirit flourishes” (Hippolytus, *Traditio apostolica*, n. 35). In the same way, the Second Vatican Council says: “Christ is the light of humanity”, and wishes “to bring all men that light of Christ which shines out visibly from the Church” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 1). The Church does not illuminate herself with her own light. She has no other light than Christ. For this reason she can be compared to the moon whose light is a reflection of the sun.

My dear brothers, I thank you because, endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, you are ready to bring “the light of Christ” to those countries where nature with its play of light and darkness, of sun and moon, points expressively and often dramatically to the image used by the Council. Even if at times your heart could be saddened because Christ's light, despite all your efforts, barely glimmers, I encourage you not to lose your zeal, since the light of Christ is stronger than the darkest night. From my personal experience during my Pastoral Visit, as also from reading your quinquennial reports, I am aware of the many lights, which together with your priests, deacons, religious and innumerable committed women and men, you have lit in recent years. In this way your particular Churches, “though they may often be small and poor, or existing in the diaspora” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 26), reflect the features expressed in the Creed.

3. *I believe the one Church.* For you, ecumenism and ecclesial life go together like fish and water. Interdominational dialogue extends from the private sphere to the level of ecclesial leadership, and is not confined to words. It is a joy to me that in Sweden St Birgitta is equally honoured by Lutherans and Catholics. You should consider yourselves truly fortunate to have this “holy ecumenical woman”! Her life and her works provide us with a common bond. “Lord, show me your way and grant that I may be happy to follow it”. This invocation comes from one of her prayers, which is still recited in Sweden today. All that was started by this “prophet of new times” can be part of the ecumenical movement. May I be permitted to repeat here what I said on 5 October 1991 at the tomb of St Peter, at a prayer meeting for Christian unity: “Ecumenism is a journey which is made together, but we are not able to chart its course or its duration beforehand. We do not know whether the journey will be smooth or rough. We only know that it is our duty to continue this journey together” (*L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 14 October 1991, n. 3, p. 1).

I am pleased with the many initiatives you tirelessly promote in your particular Churches at the theological, spiritual and liturgical levels. Thanks to these you have become competent and trustworthy spokesmen to the representatives of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities.

Continue with courage and determination on this path of mutual knowledge and *rapprochement*, faithful to “the truth we have received from the Apostles and the Fathers” (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 24). The common vision of Christ is stronger than all the divisions of history which, with God’s help, we must patiently overcome. As I explained on 9 June 1989 on the occasion of the ecumenical prayer service in Uppsala: “Not everything can be done at once, but we must do what we can today with hope for what may be possible tomorrow” (*L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, 19 June 1989, n. 4, p. 17). The Mixed Commission for Dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics is working in this direction today, and this gives me hope that sometime in the future it will be possible to reach “that fullness in which our Lord wants his Body to grow in the course of time” (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 24). On the threshold of the Year 2000 I have two matters particularly at heart: “It is essential not only to continue along the path of dialogue on doctrinal matters, but above all to be more committed to prayer for Christian unity” (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 34). Our common search for truth is as important as our common witness, and even more important is our common worship of “the true light that enlightens every man” (Jn 1:9). From the spirit of worship is born the witness to ecumenism which is more urgent than ever today (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, n. 50).

Then the Creed says:

4. *I believe the holy Church.* The Church is sanctified through Christ because it is united to him. In spite of this there is an essential difference between Christ and his Church. While Christ is holy, since he did not know sin, sinners also live in the bosom of the Church. This is why you need constant purification. The Church “is, therefore, holy, even though she embraces sinners in her bosom, for she enjoys no other life but the life of grace” (Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God*, n. 19). In your reports, you have described in detail the obstacles that the Church and her members encounter in their attempt to satisfy the demands of holiness in an age of social upheaval.

You must witness to the holy Church in the pluralistic societies in which you live. Even if they are becoming more and more the scene of clashes between various life-styles, they are at the same time an “areopagus” of dialogue between Church and State (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, n. 37). Not only in the cultures that have been shaped by religion, but also in secular societies, many people are searching for the spiritual dimension of life as a means of salvation from the dehumanization they experience daily. This so-called phenomenon of the “return to religion” is not without ambiguity, but it also contains an invitation. The Church possesses valuable spiritual gifts that she wants to offer mankind. To be able to carry out her mandate and to foster continual improvement in Church-State relations, she requires full recognition and the protection of civil laws to which, as a community, she is entitled. Only in this way will the Holy Church be able to defend “the people of life and for life” and contribute “to the renewal of society through the promotion of the common good” (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 101).

The holiness of the Church’s members is put to a hard test in the area of respect for life. What you mentioned in your quinquennial reports will be a great challenge for you in the future. Wherever its

Christian foundations are gradually removed, society is badly impaired. We observe this in the gradual break up of marriage as a fundamental form of human coexistence, which is followed by a commercialization of sexuality, which is no longer viewed with its personal dignity but as a way to satisfy one's desire or personal "needs". Conflict between the sexes and the generations inevitably follows. We see the same disintegration process in the attitude towards the unborn. To claim that a pregnancy can be interrupted because the child is handicapped, in order to spare him and others the burden of his life, is to demean all the handicapped! What applies to the beginning of human life is especially true at its end. No one is so sick, elderly or disabled that another person has the right to dispose of his life.

I therefore urge you, dear Brothers, to give an ecumenical witness to the sanctity of life: this means not only respecting others in their diversity but loving them, in the conviction that we have need of one another, that we give ourselves to one another, that we live for and are Christian to one another, to achieve together the "cultural transformation" in a society marked "by a dramatic struggle between the 'culture of life' and the 'culture of death'" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 95). I wish to recall my "pressing appeal addressed to each and every person, in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life!" (*ibid.*, n. 5).

In order to undertake this great work, "the renewal of a culture of life within Christian communities themselves" is both urgent and necessary (cf. *ibid.*). The formation of conscience is particularly significant. In fact, the Christian faith awakens consciences and is the basis of ethics. It is praiseworthy that your pastoral work should pay specific attention to the work of formation. In recent years you were able to publish translations of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in Norwegian and Swedish. Danish and Finnish translations will follow. Despite scarce financial means, you wish to continue running several Catholic schools, even in the future. I consider your willingness to be close to your priests and catechists when you teach religion classes and accept invitations to schools to be particularly praiseworthy. On this subject, I would like to mention the generous work of the many women and men who offer "home catechesis" in parish centres and, when these are not available, in their own homes, in order to sow the seed of faith in the hearts of the young and to compensate for what the new generations are deprived of in State schools. A family which passes on the Word of God becomes a "believing and evangelizing community" with a "prophetic role" (*Familiaris consortio*, n. 51). Its home is a "Church in miniature", a "domestic Church" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 11)

5. Thus the power of our faith is not only expressed aloud but also in silence. In your particular Churches innumerable communities and religious institutes work tirelessly to build God's kingdom. While as a rule the female branches follow the general trend and complain of recruitment problems, there are other tender plants which on the contrary are full of promise. In addition to the reconstruction of two Benedictine convents in Sweden, I am thinking of "the northernmost Carmel in the world", which was founded on 8 September 1990 in Tromsø when 12 sisters moved from Iceland to northern Norway. In the meantime the number of sisters has increased to 20. Carmel

expresses an essential aspect of Christian existence: contemplative life which gives priority to prayer. Anchored in its centre, which is Jesus Christ, the convent radiates its light to the parish communities around it. Not only do loud newspaper headlines have a positive effect on people, but also the unobtrusive yet obvious presence of sisters, which is another completely different but no less missionary aspect of the “holy Church”. For “the Church’s holiness is the hidden source and the infallible measure of the works of the apostolate and of the missionary effort” (*Christifideles laici*, n. 17). Something as tiny as a mustard seed can conceal within itself the growth potential of a big tree. We must put our hope in this when we recite the Creed.

6. *I believe the catholic Church.* With regard to the number of members of your particular Churches, small in comparison to the overall population, you may sometimes feel tempted to ask yourselves the troubling question: “Are we an insignificant worm?” (cf. Is 41:14). Above all, are we “Catholics” in the full sense of the term? I can share these sentiments and thoughts, and, dear Brothers, I say to you what Jesus said to those of his young followers who were discouraged: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32). With these words, he did not want them merely to wait for the world to come, but also to focus on the present: “Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Lk 17:21). God’s kingdom is already in your midst in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Even if your particular Churches are widely scattered and few in number, Jesus Christ is present in them through your service as Bishops. “Where Christ Jesus is, there is the Catholic Church” (Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Smyrn.*, 8, 2). She possesses “in herself the totality and fullness of the means of salvation” (*Ad gentes*, n. 6): the correct and complete profession of faith, the full expression of sacramental life and ordained ministry in the apostolic succession. In this basic sense, the Church was already catholic on the day of Pentecost and will remain so until the day when Christ, as Head of the Body of the Church, will come to all fullness (cf. Eph 1:22-23). I recognize with gratitude your commitment to the Catholic Church in Scandinavia, and in particular your efforts in the ministry of preaching and the administration of the sacraments. Furthermore, your zeal in visiting with your pastors parish communities that are sometimes distant and far-flung is continual. I encourage you to spread catholicity among the faithful through meetings and events which go beyond the boundaries of the individual parishes. I learned with great joy that you are intending to organize a “Katholikentag” for all Scandinavia for the Year 2000. In this way you would like to prepare for Northern Europe “a great springtime of Christianity, and we can already see its first signs” (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, n. 86). Lastly, you show together with generous women and men that your heart is beating with an authentic Catholic rhythm, when, with the little you have available for charitable and pastoral purposes, you show solidarity in promoting missionary projects. I could not pass over in silence your commitment to love your neighbour, great and small, something which is especially reflected in the fact that our Brother Bishop Kenney has filled the office of President of the European Caritas for years.

7. May I address one problem which concerns me greatly: you tell me that on Sunday in some cathedrals the Eucharist is celebrated in as many as seven different languages. In this way,

because of immigration and a multicultural society, you encounter a catholicity which is reminiscent of the first Pentecost. On the one hand, this international dimension brings enrichment, but on the other, it is also a threat to unity and identity. The criticisms and rejection which persons from other countries experience foment racial hatred and erect barriers. This is especially difficult for refugees from Asia and South America. “It shall not be so among you” (Mt 20:26). With your sympathy and example, show the priests and faithful entrusted to your care how enriching a multiplicity of the gifts of grace can be “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). “For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are *one* body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom 12:4-5). It is not the number of the faithful which makes up the catholicity of the Church, but the strength which comes to us from heaven and spreads. The tiny mustard seed possesses this quality. So do not fear, small flock! Always be careful that no thief or robber breaks into your fold (cf. Jn 10:7-10). This is why I urge you to be vigilant “at this time when Christian and para-Christian sects are sowing confusion by their activity” (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 50) and are a threat to the Catholic Church and all the Ecclesial Communities with which she is engaging in dialogue. “Wherever possible, and in the light of local circumstances, the response of Christians can itself be an ecumenical one” (*ibid.*). This duty specifically belongs to you who have received the apostolic office.

8. *I believe the apostolic Church.* Through you, my dear brothers, Christ carries out his mandate: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (Jn 20:21). Nonetheless, the apostolic office “has no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff as its head” (cf. *Lumen gentium* n. 22). I am pleased that the bonds of our apostolic communion are so close, and I assure you that the Successor of Peter shares with you deeply. I emphasize this assurance precisely because I gather from your reports that the apostolic office is needed in your Churches as a sort of bulwark against the tide.

In your countries too, civil divorces are increasing. The pastoral problem of the divorced and remarried is becoming ever more pressing. I repeat what I said on 24 January this year during the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family: these women and men cannot be given Eucharistic Communion nor reconciliation in the sacrament of Penance, yet they must “know that the Church loves them, that she is not far from them and suffers because of their situation. The divorced and remarried are and remain her members, because they have received Baptism and retain their Christian faith” (cf. *Familiaris consortio*, n. 84). Pastors are invited to be close to them “with solicitous care”, so that they may persevere in prayer and keep their faith in God’s paternal love (cf. *ibid.*).

The Lutheran Churches have recently permitted women to take leadership roles, including even that of Bishop. I particularly stress that “the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgement is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful” (*Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, n. 4).

9. As regards all these matters, you would be “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Mk 1:3), if there were no generous women and men to support you in your efforts to speak up for Christian values in a secularized society. The Council already recognized that the laity’s work is so necessary that “without it the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect” (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 10). However, this must not remain just a beautiful-sounding appeal. A particularly significant passage from my Predecessor Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* deserves to be recalled here: “What matters is to evangelize man’s culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense which these terms have.... The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures” (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 20). I urge you to support and encourage capable men and women to proclaim the Gospel “on all the ways of the world” (*Christifideles laici*, n. 44). An important way in today’s world is the media of social communication, in which the Church’s voice should not be lacking. Even if in all the countries entrusted to your pastoral care ecclesial publications exist which inform Catholics about events in the Diocese and in the world, I encourage you to be even more involved as salt, leaven and light in the media. The world does not need a vague religious sentiment, but the clarity of that message about “life in abundance” (Jn 10:10) which demands a great deal from the individual, but also gives meaning to his life and makes him worthy of being a man. Do not give people only what they want. Give them what they need! Dedication to this task is an apostolic service.

My dear Brothers,

10. *I believe the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.* We have reflected on what this profession means for you and your particular Churches. What would this Church be without her priests? You do not have an acute shortage of priests, but indigenous forces are lacking. This is why I ask you to be particularly concerned about the new generation of priests, although I am aware of your efforts in recent years to give a concrete form to the structures and processes of formation. The Swedish College in Rome, which offers hospitality to students from all of Scandinavia, as well as the effective co-operation and financial support which links you with the Church in Germany, are a foundation on which to build. Interior foundations matter more than exterior conditions. We cannot create vocations but we can pray for them.

More than three centuries separate us from the naturalist, doctor and Bishop Niels Stensen, who was born in Copenhagen and in his era worked as Vicar Apostolic for the Nordic missions. Since then, philosophy, medicine and theology have developed further. We are left with the full responsibility of imbuing life with Christian faith and morals. What Bishop Niels Stensen wrote to the Congregation for the Propaganda of the Faith on the success of his efforts is still true for us today: “The less human foresight expects in divine matters, the more clearly divine Providence is gradually revealed. In apostolic matters it is necessary to behave apostolically and take opportunities as they arise, abandoning oneself to the results of divine mercy” (*Epistolae II*, 809).

In God's hands I place your many pastoral works and the joys and sorrows that your priests, deacons, religious and laity experience in their faith life. Through the intercession of Mary the Mother of God, whom we also honour as Mother of the Church, and the saints of your lands, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to all those entrusted to your care.

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