



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF AUSTRALIA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

14 December 1998

Dear Cardinal Clancy,

Dear Brother Bishops, 1. I warmly greet you, the Bishops of Australia, with the words of the Apostle Peter: "Peace to all of you who are in Christ" (1 Pt 5:14). Your *ad Limina* visit is taking place at the same time as the Special Assembly for Oceania of the Synod of Bishops when, in the midst of the joys and anxieties of your priestly service, you have entered into the *colloquium fraternitatis* with your brother Bishops from New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands and the whole Pacific region on the centrality of Christ, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life of the peoples of your continent. Representatives of your Conference have also met various heads of Dicasteries of the Holy See to discuss aspects of your ministry in the particular situation of the Church in your land. I wish to encourage you to look to the profound strengths of the Catholic community in Australia, which in the midst of often disconcerting change continues to listen to the word of God and to bear abundant fruits of holiness and evangelical service. 2. Your meetings with some of the Congregations of the Roman Curia have focused on questions of doctrine and morality, the liturgy, the role of the Bishop, evangelization and mission, the priesthood and religious life, and Catholic education. In each of these areas, your own personal responsibility as Bishops is absolutely vital, and so I will make this the underlying theme of these brief reflections. From the Second Vatican Council, the figure of the diocesan Bishop emerged with new vigour and clarity. With your fellow Bishops and in union with the Successor of Peter, you have by the power of the Holy Spirit received the task of caring for the Church of God, the Bride purchased at the cost of the blood of the only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. *Acts* 20:28). The Bishops are "the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches", just as the Successor of Peter is "the perpetual and visible source and foundation of unity" of all the Bishops and with them of the whole body of the faithful. Since the particular Churches over which the individual Bishops preside represent a portion of the People of God assigned to the Bishop's pastoral governance, they are not complete in themselves but exist in and through communion with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. For this reason "all the Bishops have the obligation of fostering and safeguarding the unity of the faith and upholding the discipline which is common to the whole Church" (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 23). Each individual Bishop, then, is called to assume his full responsibility, setting his face resolutely against all that might harm the faith that has been handed down (cf. 1 *Cor* 4:7). In order for his ministry of sanctifying, teaching and governing to be truly effective, it goes without saying that the manner

of a Bishop's life must be irreproachable: he must openly strive for holiness, and give himself wholeheartedly and without hesitation to the service of the Gospel.³ Until recently, the Catholic community in Australia knew nothing but consistent growth. Yours is the remarkable story of a great institution built quickly, despite limited resources. Dioceses, parishes, religious communities, schools, seminaries, organizations of every kind appeared, as testimony to the strength of the Catholic faith in your land and the immense generosity of those who brought it there. Now perhaps it appears that the momentum has slackened, and the Church in Australia faces a complex situation which calls for careful discernment on the part of the Bishops, and a confident and committed response on the part of all Catholics. The underlying question concerns the relationship between the Church and the world. This question was fundamental to the Second Vatican Council and it remains fundamental to the life of the Church more than thirty years later. The answer we give to this question will determine the answer we give to a range of other important and practical questions. The advanced secularization of society brings with it a tendency to blur the boundaries between the Church and the world. Certain aspects of the prevailing culture are allowed to condition the Christian community in ways which the Gospel does not permit. There is sometimes an unwillingness to challenge cultural assumptions as the Gospel demands. This often goes hand in hand with an uncritical approach to the problem of moral evil, and a reluctance to recognize the reality of sin and the need for forgiveness. This attitude embodies a too optimistic view of modernity, together with an uneasiness about the Cross and its implications for Christian living. The past is too easily dismissed, and the horizontal is so stressed that the sense of the supernatural grows weak. A distorted respect for pluralism leads to a relativism which questions the truths taught by faith and accessible to human reason; and this in turn leads to confusion about what constitutes true freedom. All this causes uncertainty about the distinctive contribution which the Church is called to make in the world. In speaking of the Church's dialogue with the world, Pope Paul VI used the phrase *colloquium salutis*; not just dialogue for its own sake, but a dialogue which has its source in the Truth and seeks to communicate the Truth that frees and saves. The *colloquium salutis* requires that the Church be different precisely for the sake of dialogue. The unfailing source of this difference is the power of the Paschal Mystery which we proclaim and communicate. It is in the Paschal Mystery that we discover the absolute and universal truth – the truth about God and about the human person – which has been entrusted to the Church and which she offers to the men and women of every age. We Bishops must never lose confidence in the call we have received, the call to a humble and tenacious *diakonia* of that truth. The apostolic faith and the apostolic mission which we have received impose a solemn duty to speak that truth at every level of our ministry.⁴ As “the steward of the grace of the supreme priesthood” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 26), the Bishop's service to the truth has a specific and primary application in the liturgical life of his diocese. He must do everything necessary to ensure that the liturgy through which “the work of our redemption is exercised” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2) remains true to its most intimate nature: praise and worship of the Eternal Father (cf. *ibid.*, 7). It is particularly important for the Bishop to provide for the sound teaching of liturgical theology and spirituality in seminaries and similar institutions. He must also see to the creation of the resources which his diocese needs, in the form of specially trained priests, deacons and lay people, properly functioning commissions and working groups for the promotion of the liturgy and of liturgical music and art, and for the construction and maintenance of churches which in their design and furnishings will be in close harmony with underlying values of the Catholic tradition. Again, among both clergy and laity, appropriate means must be available for permanent formation and for a constant catechesis regarding the deeper meaning of the various liturgical celebrations. In many cases, it will be helpful to pool resources with neighboring dioceses or at a national level. Such arrangements should not, however, diminish the Bishop's task of ordering, promoting, and guarding the liturgical life of the particular Church (cf. *Vicesimus Quintus Annus*, 21). Since the Sacrifice of the Mass is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11), I encourage you to exhort priests and lay faithful alike to be willing to make substantial sacrifices in order to make

available and to attend Sunday Mass. Earlier generations of Catholics in Australia showed the depth of their faith by their high regard for the Eucharist and the other sacraments. That spirit is an integral part of Catholic life, a part of our spiritual tradition which needs to be reaffirmed.⁵ In preparing and celebrating the forthcoming Great Jubilee as a time of conversion and reconciliation, there is also ample room for a great catechizing effort in relation to the Sacrament of Penance. Today it is possible and necessary to overcome certain superficial applications of the human sciences in the approach to the formation of consciences. The Church in Australia should invite Catholics to encounter anew the saving mystery of the Father's love and mercy through that uniquely profound and transforming human experience that is individual, integral confession and absolution. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, this remains the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church (cf. [No. 1484](#)). The personal nature of sin, conversion, forgiveness and reconciliation is the reason why the Second Rite of Penance demands the personal confession of sins and individual absolution. It is for this same reason that general confession and general absolution are appropriate only in cases of grave necessity, clearly determined by liturgical and canonical norms. As those primarily responsible for Church life and discipline, you will know how to make clear to the faithful the theological, pastoral and anthropological reasons for the Church's practice of having children who have reached the age of reason receive the Sacrament of Penance before making their First Holy Communion (cf. [Canon 914](#)). At stake is respect for the integrity of their personal, individual relationship with God.⁶ As has been repeatedly made clear in the present Synod, there is a direct link between the ministry of the Bishop and the state of the priesthood in his diocese, with regard both to the recruitment of suitable candidates to the priesthood and to the exercise of priestly ministry. You have reported a decline in the numbers of those responding to God's call to the priesthood and religious life, a decline in the numbers of those in active ministry, and the increasing age of those presently serving the Church. You have rightly responded to this pastoral problem with prayer and various vocational promotion programmes. The fact that the shortage of vocations is not everywhere felt to the same degree would indicate that the ideal of commitment, service and unconditional self-giving for the sake of Jesus Christ still speaks to many hearts, especially where young people find priests who live out, as radically as possible, the love of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (cf. *Jn* 10:11; *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 40). Today the younger generation of Catholics shows a remarkable capacity to respond to the call to a self-giving and demanding spiritual life, precisely because they are quick to perceive that the prevailing self-centred culture is incapable of satisfying the deeper needs of the human heart. In this search they are looking for guidance; they need genuine witnesses to the Gospel message. In many ways the decline in the number of priests in active ministry is offset by greater participation of the laity in the parish setting. Lay women and men often work closely with their parish priests in liturgical matters, in catechesis, in the material administration of the parish, and in efforts to draw others to the Church by their own works of the apostolate (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 10). It falls to the Bishop to order this collaboration properly, in particular by ensuring that the parish priest is not perceived as merely one minister among many, with particular responsibility for the sacraments, but whose teaching office and governance is limited by the will of the majority or of a vocal minority. The Australian sense of equality must not be used as an excuse for stripping the parish priest of the authority and duties that pertain to his office, making it appear that the ministerial priesthood is less essential to the local Church community. Every Bishop recognizes how important it is to be close to his priests, being a father to them, affirming them, and correcting them when necessary. In a cultural climate dominated by subjective thought and moral relativism, the transmission of the faith and the presentation of the Church's teaching and discipline has to be a matter of grave concern to the Successors of the Apostles. Unfortunately, the teaching of the Magisterium is sometimes met with reservation and questioning, a tendency which is sometimes fuelled by media interest in dissent, or in some cases by the intention to use the media as a kind of stratagem to force the Church into changes she cannot make. The Bishops' task is

not to win arguments but to win souls for Christ, to engage not in ideological bickering but in a spiritual struggle on behalf of truth, to be concerned not with vindicating or promoting themselves but with proclaiming and spreading the Gospel.⁷ There is a great need to speak the truth clearly and with love, and to do so confidently, since the truth we proclaim belongs to Christ and is in fact the truth for which all people long, no matter how uninterested or resistant they may seem. Our *colloquium salutis* will produce good results only if the Holy Spirit breathes through our being and becomes our voice. Let us, then, at this moment of communion, invoke that same Holy Spirit “whose coming is gentle”, as Saint Cyril of Jerusalem says, “whose burden is light. . . for he comes to save, to heal, to teach, to admonish, to strengthen, to exhort and to enlighten the mind” (*Catecheses*, XVI, 16). I earnestly recommend to your prayer and reflection, to your responsibility and action, the document which summarizes your meetings with the various Dicasteries of the Holy See. We all well know that the Bishop’s threefold ministry of teaching, sanctifying and governing is a difficult and often burdensome one, which involves suffering and the Cross. Yet, as the document itself states: “in the mystery of the Cross we learn a wisdom which transcends our own weakness and limitations: we learn that in Christ truth and love are one, and in him we find the meaning of our vocation” (No. 17). It is above all the Mother of the Redeemer who, in her Spiritfilled Magnificat, leads us in praise of God who has called us “out of darkness into his own wonderful light” (1 Pt 2:9). May Mary, Help of Christians, watch over your land and its people. As a pledge of grace and peace in him who is always “the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (Jn 14:6), I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to the priests, religious and lay faithful who dwell in Australia. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana