



The Holy See

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

5 December 1998

Your Eminence,

Dear Brother Bishops, 1. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life" (1 Jn 1:1) this is our theme. With special intensity during these days of the *Special Assembly for Oceania of the Synod of Bishops* our thoughts are on the Word of life, Jesus Christ, who has called us to shepherd his people, and in his name to preach the Gospel of salvation to the ends of the earth. Your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*, too, is in a sense an accounting to him of the mission which is yours among the peoples of the Pacific. In greeting you, *the members of the Episcopal Conference of the Pacific*, I give glory to God because "in the islands of the sea, we hear songs of praise to the name of the Lord" (cf. *Is* 24:15-16). On your *ad Limina* visit you span time as you pray at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and acknowledge the bond of faith which connects you and your people to their witness to the Gospel; and space itself disappears as you come to the heart of the Church to visit the Successor of Peter. You come representing a complex tapestry of races, cultures and languages; yet diversity is transcended in the communion which is ours in the Body of Christ, the Church. 2. The history of evangelization in your countries is not a long one, but it is already rich in the fruits of holiness, justice and peace which only the Gospel can produce. You are witnesses to the heroic work of the missionaries who sowed the seed of faith in the hearts of your peoples. They are the men and women, priests and religious, who heard the call of Christ and, leaving behind what was naturally theirs, took his message to the peoples you represent. They preached in his name and their preaching "came...not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Th 1:5). They preached with the testimony of their lives, some even unto death. It is above all this sacrifice, grafted onto the paschal mystery of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord, which opens human hearts to the peace of the Holy Spirit. New developments in evangelization are now required; but the sacrifices of the early missionaries and especially of the martyrs like Saint Peter Chanel and Blessed Diego de San Vitores must not be forgotten. Indeed, as we move towards the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 their story must be reclaimed and told with heartfelt gratitude and joy. 3. This is a delicate time in your various countries, a time of profound change. The immediate post-colonial phase of your history is past. Independence is no longer a new experience, even if the consolidation of civil rights and freedom remains a pressing task. Your peoples are troubled by the elusiveness of the development and wellbeing to which they aspire,

especially now that in the Asia-Pacific region there has appeared unexpected economic and even political instability. There was a time when the seas kept your societies very much to themselves, but eventually those same seas became the highways bringing other cultures, which have now merged with your own. The rapid development of communications is leading to a process of *cultural globalization which is already having a great impact upon your societies*. Some effects are positive, but others are certainly negative. In such a situation the Pastors of the Church must be wise in their discernment and courageous in their decisions. It is paradoxical that the process of greater unification which globalization promises sometimes leads to greater disunity and alienation. Instead of fostering a spirit of co-operation and solidarity, it can engender an attitude of “*sauve qui peut*” both within nations and between them. This can mean the exploitation of weaker nations by stronger ones; it can mean corruption which divides leaders from the people whom they are supposed to serve; it can ignite conflict between diverging interests in a way which makes it impossible to order society on the basis of the common good. The voice of the Bishops must be clearly heard in favour of *the spirit of co-operation and solidarity which alone can ensure the well-being of your peoples*. For the Church in the Pacific nations today no task is more necessary than the new evangelization required to meet the needs of present fast changing circumstances. The new evangelization is the next phase of the *plantatio Ecclesiae* in your islands, and it calls for *the Gospel to be preached in ways that are new in ardour, methods and expression* (cf. *Veritatis splendor*, n. 106). It is not that the ways of the first missionaries were misconceived: on the contrary, in their time they were magnificently conceived and implemented. But the changing scene which you now face brings new challenges, and this will demand no less imagination and courage than was shown by the early missionaries. The task may be daunting, dear Brothers, but “he who calls you is faithful and he will accomplish it” (1 *Thes* 5:24).⁴ Evangelization calls for leadership, which in the first phase of its history in your lands was provided by the missionaries. Yet that will not be the case in this new phase. As Successors of the Apostles, the Bishops remain the prime agents of evangelization; and your closest collaborators are the priests and religious, both missionary and those locally born whom God calls within your own communities. Lay people too are ever more ready to play a decisive role in this new phase of evangelization, responding to their particular vocation within the context of the polyphonic and hierarchical nature of the Church. I wish then to reflect with you briefly upon some aspects of the *relationship between Bishops, priests and lay people*. The Bishop's role as prime agent of evangelization makes him the first servant of communion. This service has many implications, but none as immediately important as that of strengthening the bonds of grace, co-operation and friendship between the Bishop and his priests. This can be difficult, given that amidst the daily administration of Dioceses and parishes it is not always easy to find the time and energy which the building of communion requires. Yet it is essential that such time and energy be found. In some cultures, traditional customs and modes of leadership can influence the exercise of leadership by the Bishop, tending to make him a remote figure rather than the father who is always willing and able to listen to his priests and people. Sometimes, if necessary, the Bishop's leadership has to be exercised in ways that are counter-cultural, on the clear understanding — so important for the new evangelization — that inculturation of the faith does not mean absolutizing any culture to the point where no element of it can be questioned or tempered.⁵ Modes of leadership which stress privilege rather than service always create problems in the relationship between priests and lay people. This is why it is important that seminaries and houses of formation should teach *a way of leadership which is wholly geared to service* and which fills the candidates with the same zeal to preach the Gospel which we see in the early missionaries. This will demand a thorough induction into *the spirituality of the Cross*, the total giving of self which is learned only with difficulty, but without which priestly ministry becomes a form of self-service and self-glorification. In their years of preparation, candidates for ordination need to grasp the truth that *this self-emptying is the only way to a truly satisfying priestly life*, indeed that it is the essential condition for abiding joy in their lives. Without it, priestly life can turn sour and unsatisfying, opening the way

to destructive modes of behaviour. It is a sign of hope that in your part of the world at the moment there is a good number of vocations; and it is vital that these candidates be trained to be *true servants of Christ and the Church*, who know how to work in harmony and obedience with the Bishop and in close collaboration with religious and the lay faithful.⁶

Increasingly in recent years lay people have assumed greater responsibility within the Church community. This is not just because priests are not always available; *it is the work of the Holy Spirit*. Yet at times lay responsibility has been stressed in a way that sets it in opposition to priestly ministry. The truth is that *priestly leadership and lay responsibility are complementary*: where lay responsibility is rightly exercised, the priest's ministry emerges in all its richness, and vice versa. The two vocations need to be carefully distinguished, not separated, so that they may work together in the deep harmony which the God-given nature of the Church presumes. Priestly vocations flourish in situations where priests and lay people work together in mutually enriching ways. At a time of radical change, with all the uncertainty it brings, it is more important than ever for the Church to prepare lay men and women to assume roles of leadership in society which work in favour of the common good (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 42- 43). Your particular Churches are increasingly blessed with lay men and women who take an active part in the liturgy, in catechesis and other forms of Christian service. This is a cause of great satisfaction, but it is not enough. The specifically lay contribution to the work of the Gospel must reach out to embrace those vast areas of human life and culture which lie beyond the community of the Church in an ever more secularized society. Especially since the Second Vatican Council, the Magisterium has stressed consistently *the secular charism of the lay vocation* (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 31; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 70; *Christifideles Laici*, 17). This means that the chief arena for the evangelizing work of lay people is the secular world of *family, workplace, politics, culture, professional and intellectual life*. How effectively they perform this work in these areas will in large part determine how effective the new phase of evangelization of the Pacific will be. To equip lay people for this task will demand concerted attention to the theology of the lay vocation and to the social teaching of the Church, especially to those values and principles which shape *the Catholic understanding of the natural law and the common good*. All Christians should have an unassailable sense of the supreme value of human life, the inalienable dignity of the human person and *the unique importance of the family as the basic cell of society*. The abandonment of these moral points of reference is the core of a destructive secularization. And because they are abandoned only when God is excluded from the world and from human hearts, lay people need to be taught *a way of prayer which opens them more and more to the mystery of God's loving providence in every aspect of life*. A great effort is also needed in the area of education, with all the educational institutions of your particular Churches contributing to the Christian formation of young people. Such an education, far from aggravating the erosion of what is good in the traditional ways of your societies, will enhance the values which these ways embody and will lead to that convergence of Pacific traditions and Catholic teaching which the inculturation of the Gospel requires.⁷

The Churches over which you preside in the love of Christ are part of the world of Oceania, a name which suggests that it is water – the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean – which has determined your history and your culture. But it is water of a different kind – the waters of Baptism – which reveal your identity at a deeper level. The Christians of the Pacific have been buried with Christ in Baptism and raised with him to newness of life (cf. Rom 6:4). May the Holy Spirit move anew over the deep of your hearts, dear Brothers, and over the hearts of your people, so that in celebrating the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and entering the new millennium the whole Church throughout the Pacific “will set forth upon the ocean of light which is the Trinity” (*Letter to Priests 1998*, 7). The spiritual renewal which should accompany the Jubilee will bring the energies needed for the evangelizing and missionary task before you, for the apostolate of catechesis and Christian formation, for the defence of human life and dignity, and for the application of Catholic social teaching to political, economic and cultural issues. May Mary, Star of the Sea and Star of Evangelization, lead you safely to the haven where “night will be no more, nor will there be need for lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall be the light” (Rev 22:5).

In the love of Jesus Christ who alone is “the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (Jn 14:6), I gladly impart to you and the priests, religious and lay faithful of your lands my Apostolic Blessing. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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