



The Holy See

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

Monday 2 February 1998

Dear Brothers in the Episcopal Ministry,

1. I find every meeting with the Polish Bishops a joyful return to people and places familiar and dear to me. And what can I say when Bishops come to visit me from that part of Poland where the Metropolitan Archdiocese and Province of Kraków are located? Indeed, that is where I come from, and for many years I was granted to be its Pastor. I address my most cordial welcome to the Metropolitan Archbishop of Kraków, Cardinal Franciszek Macharski, and the Metropolitan Archbishops who accompany him: from Czêstochowa, Katowice and Przemyśl, as well as the Archbishop of Łódź. I also extend a greeting to the residential Bishops of the Dioceses of Bielsko-Żywiec, Gliwice, Kielce, Opole, Radom, Rzeszów, Sosnowiec, Tarnów and Zamoś

Ć -Lubaczów, and the Auxiliary Bishops of the abovementioned Archdioceses and Dioceses. Your visit *ad limina Apostolorum* has particular eloquence within the framework of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, for which the universal Church is preparing, as she wishes to pay a supreme tribute to the One God in the Blessed Trinity for the immensity of the benefits lavished on the world by the Saviour's coming to earth. The local Churches will take part in these celebrations in their own way, linking them in turn to their own important anniversaries. In Poland these events are connected with the millennium of the martyrdom of St Adalbert, its patron, and to the millennium of the institution of the first Polish metropolitan see in Gniezno, with the episcopal sees of Kraków, Wrocław and Kołobrzeg.

The visit *ad limina Apostolorum* also has a profound theological meaning. It is actually the expression of the Bishops' unity with the Bishop of Rome, in fulfilment of Christ's call to take care of the Church. It can be said that Paul's *sollicitudo omnium Ecclesiarum* is realized in this way. The Bishop of Rome and the dicasteries of the Roman Curia subject to him are given an opportunity to learn of the Pastors' problems first hand and to share their experiences with them. This is how the bond of collegial unity and responsibility in the Church is reinforced. It is the responsibility for bringing all mankind to encounter Christ, the one Saviour of the world. In this context, the deep pastoral significance of this visit can also be

seen. Indeed, it allows an evaluation to be made of the pastoral work in the Dioceses, which makes it possible to focus attention on the challenges of the contemporary world, both for the Pastors of the Church and for the whole flock.

2. The person of Jesus Christ releases enormous spiritual energy in the world, and his Good News also illumines the life of our contemporaries with its splendour. Thus it happens wherever man becomes the way of the Church and the Church - the People of God - knows no other way than Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor 2:2). At the same time, the world in which we live again and again shows its face disfigured by sin and selfishness, by many forms of violence, by deceit and injustice. This world frequently loses touch with God, denies his existence and falls into religious indifference. Sometimes on the world's face deformed by sin we see emptiness, sorrow and even despair. These phenomena can also be observed in our country. Also incumbent on the Church's Pastors is the duty of helping man, despite these problems, to rediscover Christ in his life and to walk on the way of faith in its fullness. As I wrote in the Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*: "The Church cannot abandon man, for his 'destiny' ... is so closely and unbreakably linked with Christ" (n. 14). This pastoral concern must produce great and generous acts of new evangelization, the essential mission of the Church and a concrete expression of her identity.

"*Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!*" (1 Cor 9:16). The Apostle Paul's words become for each one of us a pressing exhortation to proclaim the Gospel and to encourage renewal efforts whose purpose is to prepare "a new springtime of Christian life". These efforts, begun by the Second Vatican Council and inspired by the Holy Spirit, continue and are bearing blessed fruit. The Council's teaching, interpreted correctly in the light of the current signs of the times, is an indispensable reference point in the work of the new evangelization for all the faithful, but especially for Bishops, priests and consecrated persons. On the threshold of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, it is also necessary to reflect on the question of how far the Council's teaching is reflected in the Church's activities in Poland, in her institutions and in the style of her pastoral ministry. The Great Jubilee commits us to an examination of conscience which must also consider the "reception given to the Council, this great gift of the Spirit to the Church at the end of the second millennium" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 36).

3. Poland is currently at a crucial moment in her history. In our country's society many changes have occurred which are appreciated. The fact that lay people take part in the work of evangelization and feel ever more aware of their specific role in the Church is a cause for joy. It is the great task for the Church in Poland to deepen this ecclesial self-awareness of the Catholic laity and help it to continue growing in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. "The apostolate of the laity", we read in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, "is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church. Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself. Moreover, by the sacraments, and especially by the Eucharist, that love of God and man which is the soul of the apostolate is communicated and nourished. The laity, however, are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth. Thus, every lay person, through those gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church herself 'according to the measure of Christ's bestowal' (Eph 4:7)" (n. 33). A systematic introduction of this teaching into pastoral practice is essential at all levels: parochial, diocesan and national. Families and ecclesial and civil communities of various kinds should be formed in this light.

The saving mission of Christ's Church is carried out in the local Church. Each of these Churches, by virtue of their

hierarchical ties with the Bishop of Rome, through the ministries of the Bishop and of the priests gathered round him, can bring to man the nourishment of the word of God and sacramental grace. Recourse to this service enables the community - the Mystical Body of Christ - to be constantly built up and reinforced. Our work must primarily aim at forming man's spiritual bond with God and, at the same time, at deepening the bond of understanding and love among people. This purpose is served by the ecclesial and secular structures of the community, among which the parish and the Diocese play irreplaceable roles. The Second Vatican Council indicated a number of ways in which both parishes and Dioceses can become living bodies, pulsating with spiritual energy. Here a great and constant concern is necessary to develop the sacramental life of the faithful and their interior formation; this must be undertaken consistently and competently, so that they can feel that they are true subjects in the Church's life and take upon their shoulders their share of responsibility in the Church and in society. The effectiveness of the lay apostolate depends on their union with Christ: "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (*Jn 15:5*). In this process they have their own tasks to fulfil in the various types of Catholic associations and organizations, especially in Catholic Action, as well as in those advisory structures provided for by canon law at various levels and of various kinds. Nor should the groups and communities for the formation of lay Catholics be forgotten, those which pray together, make spiritual exercises and study the rich heritage of the Council and the Church's social teaching, which today is more necessary than ever in Poland. I hope that these tasks will also be carried out by the Plenary Synod Groups and by the different ecclesial movements which are ever more numerous in Poland. For this we give thanks to the Holy Spirit.

4. With regard to the tasks of lay Catholics, I am thinking particularly of families. The family "is placed at the service of the building up of the kingdom of God in history by participating in the life and mission of the Church.... In turn, the Christian family is grafted into the mystery of the Church to such a degree as to become a sharer, in its own way, in the saving mission proper to the Church" (*Familiaris consortio*, n. 49). Today this basic cell of social life is exposed to great danger because of a tendency in the world to weaken the family's natural permanence by replacing it with irregular unions, and even by attempts to recognize as families unions between people of the same sex. The family is also mortally threatened by the denial of the right to life of the unborn and by attacks on the younger generation's spiritual formation in lasting Christian values. With genuine sadness I followed the efforts in our homeland to legalize the murder of unborn children, and with great apprehension I accompanied in prayer those who were fighting for the right to life of every human being. In the homily I preached in Kalisz, I said: "The measure of civilization, a universal and permanent measure which includes all cultures, is its relationship with life. A civilization which rejected the defenceless would deserve to be called a barbarian civilization" (*Mass at St Joseph's Shrine*, Kalisz, Poland, 4 June 1997; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 18 June 1997, p. 4). I consider the efforts to surround every newborn child with attentive care to be worthy of praise and in need of widespread support, through a network of diocesan homes for unwed mothers and funds for the defence of life. I give thanks to God for the opportunities now available in providing children and young people with a good preparation for family life, in the pastoral care of engaged couples, in responsible parenthood and in the Christian formation of the young generation. I realize that these are not easy tasks, since more than legislative changes in their favour are involved. To change society's mentality regarding the fundamental role of the family and of man's life in society, hard work is essential. Here we need to combine the forces of the Church, the school and other milieus, in order to restore respect for the

traditional values of the family and to promote them in the educational process; everyone must collaborate, including the media, which have an enormous influence today in forming people's attitudes. In our country, the family must be surrounded by the love and care which is its due. Do all you can to prevent families in Poland from feeling isolated in their attempts to preserve their identity and to defend their rights and basic values, and help them fulfil their mission and their duties. Do not let this "community of life and love" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 48) suffer injustice or profanation. The welfare of society and of the Church is linked to the wellbeing of the family. Thus the family must be staunchly supported by the Church. I urgently ask you to do this because I am very concerned about the family and its fate in today's world.

5. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, as I reflect with you on the tasks facing the Church in Poland in connection with the new evangelization, it is impossible not to recall the meetings with young people which took place during my pilgrimage to our homeland last year. Young people are the hope of the world and of the Church. It will be they who determine our homeland's future. We cannot but note with sorrow and anxiety that in recent years the dangers to which the young generation is exposed have not only not diminished, but perhaps have even increased. Purely human values as well as the faith and moral sense have been severely endangered. Passively submitting to the tempting opportunities of the consumerist pseudoculture, often without serious reflection on the true meaning of life, love and one's duties to society, exposes the young to alienation from their family and from the human community, or even induces them to believe in the fallacious slogans spread by certain ideologies.

Young Poles have enormous resources of goodness and spiritual potential. We see these qualities, among other things, in their active participation in the religious life of the family and parish, in catechesis, in associations, in Church movements and in Catholic organizations. Young people frequently make radical choices about entering a seminary or practising various forms of the evangelical counsels. During my last visit, I confidently told Polish youth: "Be in this world bearers of Christian faith and hope by living love every day. Be faithful witnesses of the risen Christ, never turn back before the obstacles that present themselves on the paths of your lives. I am counting on you. On your youthful energy and your dedication to Christ" (*Address at a prayer service for young people*, Poznań, 3 June 1997; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 18 June 1997, p. 10). The presence of young people from all over the world, including Poland, during World Youth Day in Paris last August has shown that trust placed in young people does not disappoint. We could very clearly perceive that young people yearn deeply for the beauty of the Gospel, which contains the essential truth about Christ. But they need witnesses whose life and conduct they can imitate.

Young people are the hope of the Church as she enters the third millennium. They cannot be left without help or guidance at the crossroads of life and when faced with difficult choices. A great effort is necessary to make the Church present among youth. Concern for Christian education in the family is one of the signs of this presence, which must also be outwardly expressed in the

various forms of community life in parishes and schools. The Catholic Youth Association and Catholic Action, which are receiving new life in Poland, take into account the creative initiative of young people and train them to take personal responsibility for their own life and for that of the religious and civil community. It is constantly necessary to form apostolic lay groups in the Church, ready to develop their activity in those areas of public life which are their field of action.

Nor can we neglect the very important role which must be carried out by university chaplaincies with their structures and activities among young students. For many years this has been an irreplaceable form of the Church's pastoral care thanks to which students and teachers can receive appropriate help in developing their faith and in forming a Christian world-view. It is essential to make the most of the new opportunities available to university chaplaincies in Poland, so that they may be a school for the formation of our homeland's Catholic intelligentsia, able to undertake important tasks in the life of the Church and the nation, such as science, culture, politics or the economy.

A vast field of action requiring a wise approach is the school, where the teaching of religion has been reintroduced. Diocesan and religious priests, sisters and large numbers of lay people are involved in it. They have encountered a succession of serious educational and pedagogical problems in their contacts with children and young people. Most of these problems concern Polish society as a whole in a time of transition, but are experienced with particular intensity by children and young people and demand extraordinary sensitivity to each pupil's personality. It is therefore necessary to observe closely what is happening in the world and in Poland, and what influences the formation of convictions and attitudes in the young. They also expect a friendly and open discussion of all the problems bothering them. An effective aid in the work of catechists and students is offered by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, whose Polish translation was published in 1994. The best use possible should be made of it by school catechetical programmes which are clear in their exposition, and by catechisms adapted to today's mentality, to the pupil's intellectual capacity and to the degree of his emotional development. The catechesis of children and young people is one of the basic tasks of all pastoral work. Therefore, the harmonious co-operation of all the Pastors of the Church in Poland and a great commitment from those responsible for catechesis are essential.

As I said during your visit *ad limina Apostolorum* in 1993: "Obviously catechesis in the school needs to be completed at the parish level with the pastoral care for children and young people" (*Address to first group of Polish Bishops*, 12 January 1993). I am aware of the difficulties this type of catechesis will encounter, but it is necessary to find some solution, so that the children and young people will not treat religious teaching merely as one of the subjects taught at school, but will also draw strength from a direct contact with God in the liturgy and in the holy sacraments. I am certain you are very concerned about the question of young people and of seeing that none of them stray; and, even more, about the question of seeking out all who leave or turn their backs because of moral bewilderment and the disappointments or frustrations they have experienced.

Their progress must become a particular concern for the Church. All these problems demand deep reflection, evaluation and common action.

6. "*So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love*" (1 Cor 13:13).

Bishops are burdened with the duty of guiding the People of God in charity, after the example of Christ, who "went about doing good" (Acts 10:38), to the point of making the total gift of himself. Others can surpass or compete with you in many things, but no one can restrain the Church from proclaiming the Gospel of love, from standing up for those for whom no one stands up. A persevering and disinterested witness of effective love has an unbreakable link with evangelization because it is a witness to God's love.

For several years in Poland major changes have been taking place in the the economy. They are indispensable for making the economy an effective instrument of social progress and well-being. Nonetheless, in Poland there are still many who live in extremely difficult conditions, the homeless, the abandoned, the hungry, the handicapped and those who suffer injustice, who have found themselves in this plight through no fault of their own. There are also some who have been forced to the fringes of social life because of errors or crimes committed, or because they succumbed to some vice, especially alcohol and drugs. The number of persons infected with AIDS is also growing. All these people must be the object of the Church's attentive pastoral care. It is impossible to close our eyes to their daily need for housing, food, medical treatment or the search for a job and the possibility of earning a living. May the Church's voice be clear and audible in every place where it is necessary to plead for the future of these persons and for their rights.

I learned with joy of the vigorous activity of *Polish Caritas* and the development of the various diocesan charities, which in recent years have been able to create their own effective structures and organize themselves so as to offer great assistance today to the needy in Poland and beyond its borders. Here I want to stress with deep feeling the concern for handicapped children, for the organization of homes for the children of poor families, for the help offered to the victims of various misfortunes and to the families who were victims of the disastrous flooding in Poland last year; and beyond Polish borders, the contribution to the aid programme for nations and people tried by war, sickness or disasters should be mentioned. These initiatives also repay the debt of gratitude for the international solidarity once shown to Poland and which is always offered to us in our various needs. This assistance would be impossible without the great generosity shown by Polish society. I am also pleased because in recent years in our country, many charitable organizations have arisen which, although they are not institutionally connected with the Church, nevertheless stem from the good and merciful hearts of persons sensitive to poverty and injustice. The witness of charity is an expression of concern and responsibility for man and the fulfilment of Christ's words: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (*Mt 25:40*). Christ's words must prompt us, always and in every situation, to concrete action.

7. Giving priority to charity effectively opens men's hearts to the Gospel, and an attitude of dialogue enables them to discover in the Church a place where freedom not only finds a defence against misuse but also flourishes in free adherence to Christ the Lord. The evangelizing Church must seek to "fully [mirror] the image of her crucified Lord, the supreme witness of patient love and of humble meekness" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 35). Apostolic zeal, full of sensitivity and spiritual depth, and based on true wisdom and holiness of life, particularly in those who are called to proclaim the Gospel, is a sign of openness to all people, to the whole world embraced in the saving plan of God who is Love.

I would like to add that the new evangelization, carried out by the Church, draws its effectiveness and strength from prayer. Let us remember the enormous importance prayer has had in the history, indeed so recently, of the struggle for freedom. Must not the Church in Poland, as she faces the immensity of her tasks, gather anew in assiduous prayer? Indeed, prayer has the power to involve all the baptized in the new evangelization, which is the work of the Holy Spirit. Prayer teaches the methods of God's action; it purifies us, removing all that separates us from God and from men, and from all that threatens unity. Prayer protects us against the temptation of timidity, from narrowness of heart and mind; it is prayer that raises man's eyes to see things in God's perspective and that opens the way of the human heart to divine grace. A life of prayer requires participation in the liturgy, receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation and participation in Mass. Indeed, the Eucharistic banquet also provides the spiritual food so necessary to every human being. Participation in Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation is an inexhaustible source for the interior life and the apostolate. It is indispensable then to sensitize the faithful to the festive character of the Lord's Day.

The Polish Bishop's Conference, particularly on the eve of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, must urge people to pray fervently and to persevere in prayer, and must be their guide, showing the faithful the wealth of gifts God wants to bestow on those who ask him for them. May appropriate pastoral initiatives at the national, diocesan or parochial levels foster the spiritual development of the greatest possible number of the faithful. May the media of social communications, especially the Catholic media, also contribute to this, using their methods to the best advantage. Lastly, may Catholic movements and associations make the idea of the apostolate of prayer their own, and may they help their members, especially young people, to "put out into the deep". Remember that no external activity can promote evangelization more than union with God in prayer.

8. We owe the evangelization and proclamation of the Good News in our land to the sons and daughters of the nations who were baptized before our forebears. St Adalbert and the first Polish martyrs are an eloquent example of the fact that evangelization, at its deepest level, is sharing Christ "to the end of the earth" (*Acts 1:8*), which demands the gift of self. This is the logic of the evangelization begun by Christ and continued by the Apostles. So it must remain today and for ever. The Church in Poland has made and is making a great contribution to missionary work. Here

I would like to express my thanks to you for your generous commitment to the missions. In this attitude your collegial responsibility for the evangelization of the world is also expressed; indeed "missionary activity is the greatest and holiest duty of the Church", as we read in the Council's Decree *Ad gentes* (cf. n. 29). Frequently Bishops from various parts of the world send me requests for missionaries from Poland. I put this problem to your heart. Urge your community to be generously open to the Church's missionary activity in today's world. In fact, nothing so energizes ecclesial life or contributes so much to reawakening vocations as giving preachers of Christ to those who do not know his teaching. I also take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude for our missionaries' generous labours: to the priests, religious, members of the institutes of consecrated life and lay faithful who have given themselves totally to the service of evangelization. Let us support them with fervent prayer, so that the proclamation of the Good News, assisted by divine grace, may achieve the desired results in mission lands.

I have entrusted all these important Polish matters to the Mother of Christ at Jasna Góra during my last stay in my beloved country. We always went there to ask Mary's help in remaining faithful to God, to the Cross, to the Gospel, to Holy Church and to her Pastors. Here I would like to repeat once again the words I spoke then as I stood before her: "I come to you today, O Mother, to exhort my brothers and sisters to persevere with Christ and his Church, to encourage the wise use of regained freedom, in the spirit of what is most beautiful in our Christian tradition. Queen of Poland, recalling with gratitude your motherly protection, I entrust to you my homeland and the social, economic and political changes taking place in her. May desire for the common good prevail over selfishness and divisions. May all who exercise public service see in you the humble Handmaid of the Lord; may they learn to serve and to recognize the needs of their fellow countrymen, as you did at Cana in Galilee, so that Poland may become a nation in which love, truth, justice and peace reign. May the name of your Son be glorified in it" (*Prayer to Our Lady of Jasna Góra*, 4 June 1997; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 18 June 1997, p. 5). So may it be and may almighty God bless you in your pastoral ministry in my homeland and yours.

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