



The Holy See

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

Thursday, 19 February 1998

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*¹ I joyfully welcome you, the third group of Pastors of God's Church in Spain to make your *ad limina* visit to Rome, the city that preserves the memory of Sts Peter and Paul. I extend my cordial greetings to the Cardinal Archbishop of Barcelona, with his Auxiliaries, to the Archbishop of Oviedo, with his Auxiliary, and to the Bishops of León, Astorga and Santander; to the Archbishop of Tarragona, with the Bishops of Urgell, Lleida, Vic, Solsona and Tortosa, with a special thought for the Bishop of Girona, absent because of surgery. Through you I would like to extend my greetings to the priests, deacons, men and women religious and faithful of your particular Churches, *telling them once again of the affection and esteem I owe them as Pastor of the universal Church* (cf. [*Lumen gentium*](#), n. 22). I am grateful for Cardinal Ricardo María Carles Gordó's kind words on behalf of you all, telling me of your hopes and concerns as well as the pastoral charity that motivates you in the ministry of guiding the People of God, at whose head you have been placed as leaders (cf. [*Christus Dominus*](#), n. 4). I thank you and assure you of a constant prayer to the Lord that amid the trials which your mission sometimes involves, you will not lack anything; neither fortitude (Acts 4:33) nor the consolation of the Holy Spirit.² In Catalonia, Asturias, León and Cantabria, regions with deep Christian roots, *important changes have taken place, as in other parts of Spain, and are continuing to occur* in the population and in economic activity. In fact, the accelerated transformation of a rural society into one that is mainly industrial and commercial has given rise in recent decades to *a greater mobility of people*, whose focus of interest and cultural development are changing, and whose way of life is notably altering the face of society itself. In your quinquennial reports you reflected on this situation in which you feel spurred to renew your pastoral activity, new conditions in which the Good News can be proclaimed and the People of God guided and gathered through the sacramental presence of Christ. In this regard, *I would like to encourage you, so that God's Church in these noble lands will continue to be a place of love and hospitality* where all the faithful feel they are brothers and sisters, no one is excluded and there is no distinction of origin or culture, so that she may be a leaven of unity, "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Mt 5:13-14).³ In hearing my call to prepare suitably for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, you, the Bishops in Spain, are carrying out your *Pastoral Plan of Action for the Four-Years 1997-2000*, entitled *Proclaiming the Year of the Lord's Favour*. In this plan, echoing my Apostolic Letter [*Tertio millennio adveniente*](#), you recall that "the primary objective of the Jubilee [is] the strengthening of Christians' faith and witness" (n. 42). In fact, faith, a gift of God and a person's free response, and

witnessing to it are based on one overall pastoral objective at this time. I am pleased in this regard to recall, as you have pointed out: "In order that no separation may arise between faith and life and that they do not run parallel to each other without converging, it is necessary to inspire and encourage our faithful to be consistent in their faith and life in each personal situation and in the concrete circumstances of contemporary society, where new questions are being raised in various areas, many of which are also new" (*Pastoral Plan of Action*, n. 107).⁴ One of these areas, so called into question in our times but so important for the present and future of society, is *the family*. I am aware of your commitment to defending and promoting this institution which originates in God and his plan of salvation (cf. *Familiaris consortio*, n. 49). Today we see a trend, very widespread in some regions, which tends to weaken its true nature. Indeed, there are many attempts to put the family on the same level in public opinion and civil legislation as mere unions not recognized by constitutional law. Some even seek the recognition of same-sex unions as families. The crisis of marriage and the family impels us to proclaim with pastoral firmness, as an authentic service to the family and to society, *the truth about marriage and the family* as God has established it. To neglect to do so would be a grave pastoral omission that would lead believers into error as well as those who have the important responsibility of taking decisions for the common good of the nation. This truth is valid not only for Catholics but for all men and women without distinction, since marriage and the family are an irreplaceable good of society, which cannot remain indifferent to their degradation or disappearance. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the family must give witness to its own values before society and itself: "The role that God calls the family to perform in history derives from what the family is; its role represents the dynamic and existential development of what it is. Each family finds within itself a summons that cannot be ignored, and that specifies both its dignity and its responsibility: family, become what you are" (ibid., n. 17). In this regard, Pastors and married couples involved in the Church must delve deeper into the theology of marriage, help young married couples and families in difficulty to recognize more clearly the value of their sacramental commitment and receive the grace of the covenant. Married lay persons must likewise be the first to witness to the greatness of conjugal and family life based on commitment and fidelity. Through the sacrament, their human love acquires an infinite value so that the couple can manifest Christ's love for his Church in a particular way and assume an important responsibility in the world: to give birth to children called to become children of God, and to help them in their human and spiritual growth. Dear Brothers: *guide Christian families*, encourage the family apostolate in your Dioceses and promote movements and associations of marital spirituality; *stir up their apostolic zeal so that they will make their own the task of the new evangelization*, open the doors to those who are homeless or living in difficult situations, and bear witness to the great dignity of disinterested and unconditional love.⁵ For the defence and promotion of the family institution, it is important that those who intend to contract the sacrament of marriage be properly prepared for it (cf. can. [1063](#), [1061](#) CIC). This is the way to encourage the formation of authentic families who live according to God's plan. To do this, not only must the anthropological aspects of human love be explained to the engaged couple, but also the basis of a genuine conjugal spirituality, by understanding marriage as a vocation that enables the baptized to incarnate faith, hope and charity in their new social and religious situation. The completion of this specific preparation can also lead to the re-evangelization of the baptized who approach the Church to ask for the sacrament of marriage. Indeed, as you have pointed out, "many adolescents and young people, having participated in the catechesis or catechumenate for Confirmation, later give up their Christian formation, which must be ongoing" (*Pastoral Plan of Action*, n. 127). Although today, because of widespread education, young people have acquired a culture superior to that of their parents, in many cases Christian life is not at the same level, since not only ignorance of religion but a certain moral and religious emptiness can be noted in the younger generations. In this area it is important for you to prepare the ecclesial communities so that once they have experienced and can witness to God's love they will be able effectively to show its depth to those who need to know it.⁶ I would also like to mention the

urgent need to encourage catechesis at all levels, since in order to strengthen faith and the witness to it, evangelization must be intensified by ardently proclaiming Jesus Christ as the one Saviour of the world, in the total reality of his mystery, expressed in his life and his word, and confessed by the Church. Catechesis introduces the person of Jesus to the men and women of our time so that they will follow him, thereby strengthening their life in the Spirit, which encourages full human development. I therefore urge you to spare no effort to ensure that catechetical activity, an essential aspect of the evangelizing mission the Lord has entrusted to us, is always carried out in your Dioceses, relying on properly formed catechists and adequate means in order to offer the faithful a more vivid knowledge of Christ's mystery. For this I appreciate and admire the generosity of the many catechists who work in parishes and other pastoral centres and dedicate their time and energy to an activity so essential to the Church. Lack of religious instruction or poor assimilation of the faith would leave the baptized unprepared for the *real dangers of secularism, moral relativism or religious indifference*, with the consequent risk of losing your people's deep piety, which is beautifully expressed in the worthy and evocative Christian displays of popular devotion. I encourage you then, before the Great Jubilee, to promote a new phase of catechesis which will help contemporary man to be conscious of God's mystery and his own, and which will foster a prayer of praise and thanksgiving for the gift of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 32).⁷ There is a continual need for the Church to be involved in the education of young people and children, giving a pastoral response to their educational requirements. She does so through her option for man and her desire to collaborate in the school with families and society, advocating integral formation and defending the right of parents to give their children a religious and moral upbringing in accordance with their own beliefs. In this task, the Church is present through Catholic educators whose work is inspired by their faith, as well as through her own educational institutions. This is a service to society, which must be recognized and encouraged. In any formation that claims to be complete, the religious dimension cannot be neglected; young people must be educated in a way that develops all the capacities of the human being. In this regard, the Church, while respecting other possible ways of thinking, has the right to teach the values that flow from the Gospel and the moral norms proper to Christianity. However, as you have said, "the teaching of Catholic religion and morality, or ethical teaching, in the context of primary education and especially in middle- or secondary-school education, has been marginalized for many years by the public authorities" (*Pastoral Plan of Action*, n. 51). Taking into account the primary aspect of service, which must also seek continuous improvement in the quality of teaching and the careful selection and qualification of the teaching staff who impart it, I encourage you to continue your effort to find as quickly as possible, together with the competent civil administration, the solution to pending problems regarding the juridical status of religion and those who teach it.⁸ Dear Brothers, I wanted to present these reflections to you and to share with you some desires that will certainly help you in your pastoral work. In closing this meeting, I would like once again to express to you my joy at having shared the concerns and hopes of your episcopal ministry and at having observed your efforts to strengthen the Church's vitality in your Dioceses. I hope that this visit to the Successor of Peter, your prayer at the tombs of the Apostles and your meetings with the dicasteries of the Roman Curia will be a source of energy and confidence in the future for you, in communion with the universal Church. I encourage you to continue preparing for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, inviting all the Catholics of Spain to reach out to their brothers and sisters in order to proclaim this Good News to them. May the Blessed Virgin Mary, so deeply venerated in your lands and at whose shrines in Covadonga and Montserrat I have had the opportunity to kneel in prayer asking for her maternal intercession for this important portion of God's People on pilgrimage in those lands, help you in your episcopal mission. With these sentiments, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to each of you and to all the priests, religious and faithful of your Dioceses. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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