



The Holy See

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

Thursday, 18 June 1998

Your Eminence,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to receive you here, Pastors of Christ's Church in the Netherlands, during your *ad limina* visit to the Successor of Peter, "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). It is also a time of grace for you in Rome. Thus it gives you an opportunity to experience more intense mutual relations. I ask the Lord to accompany you so that your meetings with my assistants, in the different dicasteries of the Roman Curia, and with one another, may be an occasion to deepen and reinforce the *affectus collegialis*. May they help you continue in your apostolic ministry in ever more trusting collaboration within your Bishops' Conference, close to the President you have elected, and sustain you in your particular diocesan duties as you share in the "responsibility of the Bishops towards the universal Church and her mission, in affective and effective communion around Peter" (*Final Address at the Eighth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 27 October 1990, n. 1; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 5 November 1990, p. 7).

You have come on pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the pillars of the Church, to renew your hope and apostolic dynamism so as to teach and proclaim the Good News more intensely to the People of God entrusted to your pastoral care. I ask the Holy Spirit to keep you steadfast in the faith so that, in this difficult period which the Church is going through in your country, you may zealously and confidently exercise your *episcopate* and authority as a service to unity and communion. I thank Your President, Cardinal Adrianus Johannes Simonis, for his words which brought out some salient aspects of social and ecclesial life in the Netherlands.

2. In your quinquennial reports you informed me of your principal concerns about the *priestly ministry*, which is experiencing a deep identity crisis in your country. I know that your diocesan priests have a special place in your hearts,

since “in order to care for a particular section of the Lord’s flock, [they] form one priestly body and one family of which the Bishop is the father” (*Christus Dominus*, n. 28). First of all, I ask you to convey to the priests of your Dioceses my trustful affection and encouragement for the ministry they carefully provide. I appreciate their tire- less commitment and their efforts in frequently difficult situations. Despite their small numbers and their ever more exhausting tasks, they willingly bear the burdens of the day and devote them- selves heart and soul to the ministry Christ and his Church entrust to them.

In order constantly to discover and maintain the joy of mission, it is most important that the Lord’s ministers strengthen their *spiritual life*, particularly through daily prayer, which is “the remedy of salvation” (St Paulinus of Nola, *Letters* 34, 10), and through the intimate meeting with the Lord in the Eucharist, which is the focal point of the priest’s day (cf. *General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours*, n. 1). In the same way, regular reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which re- establishes the sinner in grace and restores friendship with God, helps the priest in turn to bring forgiveness to his brothers and sisters. These are a source of indispensable nourishment for Christ’s disciples, and even more for those who are responsible for leading and sanctifying the Christian people. I would also like to insist on the need to celebrate worthily the *Liturgy of the Hours*, which helps to enrich the People of God with a mysterious apostolic fruitfulness (cf. *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*, n. 18), and on time for daily prayer: in this way the priest revives the gift of God within him, prepares for his mission, strengthens his priestly identity and builds up the Church. Indeed, it is before God that the priest becomes aware of the call he has received and renews his availability for the particular mission entrusted to him by the Bishop in the Lord’s name, thereby showing that he is available for the work of the Holy Spirit, who gives growth to every action (cf. 1 Cor 3:7).

Priests are called to be joyful witnesses to Christ through their teaching and the witness of an upright life corresponding to the commitment they made on the day of their ordination. They are your “sons and friends” (*Christus Dominus*, n. 16; cf. Jn 15:15). You must remain attentive to their spiritual and intellectual needs, reminding them that, although they live among men and take modern life into account, like all the faithful they must not model themselves on today’s world, but must conform their lives to the Word they proclaim and the sacraments they celebrate (cf. Rom 12:2; *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 3); thus they will express “the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 2). Encourage them to pray personally and to support one another in this regard. Also, invite them constantly to deepen their knowledge of theology, which is necessary to spiritual and pastoral life. In fact, how can they preach the Gospel and be “dispensers of a life other than that of this earth” (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 3), if they do not remain close to the heart of Christ like the Apostle he loved, and if they do not apply themselves through continuing formation to a true understanding of the faith?

3. I encourage priests to reinforce their *priestly fraternity*, especially among the different generations, first of all through common prayer which changes mutual relations and enables them to support one another in mission through dialogue, friendship and the sharing of pastoral tasks. This is an incomparable treasure for the priesthood. On your part, you are concerned to encourage the harmonious collaboration of all, which can only help to strengthen the Church’s dynamism. Everyone, priests and laity, should pay special attention to young priests by helping them with their first steps in the ministry, even when the way they view the priesthood does not correspond exactly to the way it was lived by their predecessors. The reality of the priesthood and the Church transcends specific pastoral methods or practices.

My thoughts also turn to the elderly priests. Together with them, I give thanks for all they have done with fidelity. Insofar

as they can, may they be willing to serve in an assistant capacity, guiding with their fraternal advice and the wisdom of their experience younger priests who justifiably receive heavy ecclesial responsibilities! The service of Christ can in no way be compared to or finish under the same conditions as professional work.

4. I would also like to recall the important role of the priest in catechesis and in teaching the faith at every phase in the life of the faithful and in their discovery of the sacraments; he should organize a dynamic ministry for young people. Guiding children and young people on their way to the Lord is a very important mission which involves their future as adults and Christians. The local Christian community is built on the teachings of the faith. Therefore, it is important for priests who are especially suited to this essential aspect of the Church's mission because of their theological and pastoral training to support catechists and work with them. It is your task to continue developing new and serious catechetical programmes, with great pedagogical concern and particular attention to your country's specific culture, in order to offer priests and lay people the tools they need and the necessary handbooks for teaching that is faithful to the faith of the Church. To this end, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides the doctrinal norms of reference. I therefore urge priests and laity to renew their commitment to this service for young people, in order to help them meet the person of Christ. They will discover what Christ accomplishes in children's hearts, sowing in them that seed of eternal life which remains throughout their life. In this regard, in order to remain convinced of how essential their work is, educators should always remember what Cardinal John Henry Newman said about the impressions of his childhood, namely: "God's presence is not discerned at the time when it is upon us, but afterwards, when we look back upon what is gone and over" (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, IV, 17).

5. For the Church of the future, Bishops must always be particularly attentive to the *formation of seminarians*. To this end, you have considered it necessary to reorganize your seminaries. Some of you have made great efforts to create new diocesan seminaries. Continue to put great importance on the pastoral care of vocations, in which all the faithful should participate. How will young men discover Christ's call if the Church does not transmit it through priests and lay people, and if she does not show what happiness there is in serving the Lord? Also, watch over the discernment of the candidates and their gradual human maturation: you are aware of the personal and family difficulties that young people have experienced in recent decades. It is therefore essential to guide them in their spiritual and ecclesial growth, so that they can commit themselves with interior freedom and the human balance required for the priestly ministry. Therefore, be attentive to the quality of their spiritual formation and programmes of intellectual formation — philosophical, theological and moral — so that future priests will be suited to preaching the Gospel in a world whose subjectivist tendencies and an exclusively scientific way of speaking frequently replace a sound anthropology and try to give meaning to life independently of faith in God. They will thus be able to give suitable answers to the questions debated in public opinion and the assertions which tend to confuse truth and sincerity. The wise norms given in the *Ratio institutionis sacerdotalis* are particularly useful for structuring priestly formation. In a society in which the Christian life and celibacy are often viewed as obstacles to a person's development, it is useful to teach young people asceticism and self-control, sources of inner balance. Families may be uneasy about seeing their sons or daughters leave everything to follow Christ; it is therefore necessary to educate them "regarding the evangelical, spiritual and pastoral reasons proper to priestly celibacy, so that they will help priests with their friendship, understanding and co-operation" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 50). May the ecclesial community as a whole show the greatness and beauty of self-giving in celibacy that is freely chosen for love of the Lord as "a value that is profoundly connected with ordination" (ibid.), as your Bishops' Conference had also recalled in a pastoral letter in 1992! This in no way detracts from lay life and marriage!

6. Although few in number in the majority of your Dioceses, the *lay faithful* active in pastoral life take on many commitments in co-operation with the Church's Pastors, the Bishops, priests and deacons who, as ordained ministers, have the duty to instruct and govern God's People in the name of Christ the Head (cf. *Code of Canon Law, can. 1008*). In rejoicing over their deep *sensus Ecclesiae*, I would like to acknowledge the work of the men and women who carry out important roles in various areas of ecclesial life, especially in liturgical services and the guidance of youth groups. Many of you have expressed to me your concern to develop the pastoral care of marriage and the family in order to resist ideologies that destroy this basic cell of society, and the subjectivist and extremely liberal trends in sexual matters which are continuing to increase. I gladly encourage Christians who take responsibility for preparing couples for marriage and supporting families in trouble, in full accord with the Church's teaching. Offer all the faithful of your Dioceses my affectionate greetings and my encouragement to continue to take an active part in the Church's one mission (cf. *Christifideles laici*, n. 25). In this area the tasks, charisms, vocations and services are different and complementary. It is essential that the ecclesial communities recognize the role of priests, particularly their liturgical and sacramental functions, with respect for the norms in force.

Recognition of the specific nature of each vocation is a sign of Christian maturity and of the awareness that the faithful have their own vocation and specific tasks "that find their foundation in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, and for many of them, in marriage" (*ibid.*, n. 23). Indeed, it is impossible to think of lay activity as a substitute for the particular mission of ordained ministers. Thus, attention should be paid to the laity's place in the Christian community and in human affairs. In this regard, it would be good to reflect on what the Second Vatican Council said in chapter IV of the Constitution *Lumen gentium* (nn. 30-38) on the laity's role in the Church. Their union with Christ in the ecclesial body obliges them to carry out their own specific activities for the proclamation of the Gospel and for the growth of God's People, particularly by taking an active part in the life of the Christian community and of the city, and by fulfilling their own mission of giving a Christian inspiration to temporal matters (cf. *ibid.*, n. 31; *Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 7). From this perspective, it is the duty of Pastors to give them a proper formation for fulfilling their tasks.

7. Do not be afraid to remind the *laity* that their service depends on a serious spiritual life. You have stressed the growing interest of the faithful in making a retreat in monasteries and in receiving spiritual direction. You also note with joy the increase in the number of adult Baptisms and Confirmations. Invite the Christian people to draw constantly from the sources of life through participation in the Sunday Eucharist, which is nourishment for their journey and where Christ is truly present through his Body and Blood (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1375*); presided over by the priest as "a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ, the Head and Shepherd" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 15), Holy Mass builds up the Christian community. In this regard, the Christian people must have an abiding awareness of the importance of the parish as a centre of local ecclesial life. Also invite the faithful to receive the sacrament of Penance more regularly: it enables them to discover the gift of God and to be merciful towards our brothers and sisters. Confession "helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1458*).

8. In your quinquennial reports, you have told me of your deep concern for the future of *Catholic education*, whose mission includes the human, moral and spiritual formation of young people. This represents its truly Catholic character. It is important to do all you can so that the Church, strong in her traditions and experience, can pursue her specific educational goals. It is the task of the lawful authorities, in sincere dialogue with Church leaders, to offer parents the

possibility of freely exercising their educational responsibilities by choosing the schools that in their judgement correspond to their values, which they naturally want to pass on to their children. I would also like to underscore the eminent role of *Catholic universities* in the intellectual, scientific and technical fields. Whatever their subject, teachers must strive to communicate Catholic anthropological and moral values to their students; in these institutes, theologians have the exalted task of explaining the depth of the divine mysteries by faithfully teaching Christian dogma and morals based on Revelation and the Magisterium, and through dialogue with the other university disciplines (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 10; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian, *Donum veritatis*, 24 May 1990). It is up to them in particular to recall, in season and out of season, the basic principles of respect for human life. Total fidelity to the Magisterium is therefore required of them, “for they teach in the name of the Church” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 67). Therefore, theological teaching cannot be limited to mere personal reflection; it is at the service of the truth and of communion. A theologian whose teaching is not in harmony with the Magisterium can only bring harm to the university, lead the faithful astray and wound the Church.

9. You have told me of your worries about the future of *religious life* in your country because of the lack of vocations and the ageing of the various institutes’ members. I first of all entrust you with the task of telling religious that the Church still counts on them today with hope and trust, and invites them to tirelessly pass on the Lord’s call, to live the evangelical counsels with courage and fidelity and not to hastily abandon the essential areas of pastoral life, especially education, where they can impart to young people human and Christian values, but also the field of health care and assistance to the elderly and the poor. May those responsible for religious institutes, in consultation with the Bishops, continue to take an active part in pastoral life! Also convey my warm greetings to the institutes of contemplative life. They have an essential function, since they “are for the Church a reason for pride and a source of heavenly graces”; “they offer the ecclesial community a singular testimony of the Church’s love for her Lord” and they contribute to the growth of the People of God (*Vita consecrata*, n. 8). Their houses and spiritual retreats are valuable for Pastors and faithful, who can thus find in solitude and silence a time of rest and inner refreshment with the Lord, in order to carry out their mission with renewed strength. In a period of fewer vocations, it is important for the whole Church to have an ever greater awareness of the value of consecrated life.

10. In this year dedicated to the Holy Spirit, in which we are all invited to prepare for the Great Jubilee, the Church ceaselessly renews her prayer to the One whom the Lord promised and gave to his Apostles to guide and build up the Mystical Body of Christ. If we remain faithful to the mission we have received, we can be convinced that God will never abandon his People and will give them his grace and the means to ensure his mission in the world. With faith in God’s loving care, I entrust you to the intercession of the saints of your land and that of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, to whom we must continuously turn as our protectress and our guide. I wholeheartedly impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, to the priests, deacons, seminarians and religious, as well as to the lay people of your Dioceses.

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