



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS FROM THE STATES
OF MICHIGAN AND OHIO (U.S.A.)
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

21 May 1998

Dear Cardinal Maida,

*Dear Brother Bishops,*1. On the occasion of your *Ad Limina* visit, I welcome with great joy the fifth group of Bishops from the United States, from the States of Michigan and Ohio. Your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul provides a fresh opportunity to reflect on the witness which they gave *usque ad sanguinis effusionem*, and expresses the profound bond of communion which exists between the Bishops and the Successor of Peter. These days are therefore a time of reflection on your own ministry as Bishops and your special responsibility before Christ for the well-being of his body, the Church. May the example of the first witnesses and their intercession be a source of strength to you in preaching the Gospel, bearing in mind Saint Paul's words to Timothy: "the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith" (1 Tim 1:5). In this series of *Ad Limina* talks, I have chosen to reflect on the opportunities presented by the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 for evangelization in the light of the extraordinary grace which was and is the Second Vatican Council. At my last meeting with Bishops from your country, I referred to the distinctive apostolic character of the Bishop's own ministry and its importance for the spiritual renewal of the Christian community. Today I wish to mention the identity and mission of priests, your co-workers in the task of sanctifying the people of God and handing on the faith (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 28). With immense gratitude I think of all your priests whose lives are deeply marked by fidelity to Christ and generous dedication to their brothers and sisters. Alongside their brothers and sisters in the consecrated life, to whom I hope to dedicate a future reflection in this series, they are at the heart of the renewal which the Holy Spirit continually fosters in the Church.2. Two years ago I celebrated my own Fiftieth Anniversary of ordination, and I can truly say that my experience of the priesthood has been a source of great joy to me throughout these years. Reflecting on the priesthood in *Gift and Mystery*, I emphasized two essential truths. The priestly vocation is a *mystery* of divine election, and therefore a *gift* which infinitely transcends the individual. As I look back, I am constantly reminded of the words of Jesus to his Apostles: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (Jn 15:16). In meditating on these words, a priest becomes more aware of the mysterious choice that God has made in calling him to this service, not because of his talents or merits but in virtue of God's "own purpose and the grace which he gave us" (2 Tim 1:9). It is vital for the life of

the Church in your Dioceses that you devote much attention to your priests and to the *quality* of their life and ministry. Through word and example you should constantly remind them that the priesthood is a special vocation which consists in being uniquely configured to Christ the High Priest, the teacher, sanctifier and shepherd of his people, through the imposition of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. It is not a career, nor does it mean belonging to a clerical caste. For this reason “the priest must be conscious that his life is a mystery totally grafted on to the mystery of Christ and of the Church in a new and specific way and this engages him totally in pastoral activity” (*Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, No. 6). Thus the priest’s whole life is transformed so that he may *be Christ* for others: a convincing and efficacious sign of God’s loving and saving presence. He should live the priesthood as a total gift of himself to the Lord. And if this gift is to be authentic, his thoughts, attitudes, activity and relations with others must all show that he has truly put on the “mind of Christ” (cf. 1 Cor 2:16). With Saint Paul he should be able to say: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). We should gratefully recognize the signs of a genuine renewal of the spirituality of the priesthood, and foster a fresh blossoming of the authentic theological tradition of priestly life wherever it may have become obscured.³ If Bishops and priests are to be truly effective witnesses to Christ and teachers of the faith, they have to be men of prayer like Christ himself. Only by turning frequently and trustingly to God and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit can a priest fulfill his mission. Priests, and seminarians preparing for the priesthood, need to interiorize the fact that there is “an intimate bond between the priest’s spiritual life and the exercise of his ministry” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 24). Every priest is called to develop a great personal familiarity with the word of God, so that he may enter ever more completely into the Master’s thought and strengthen his attachment to the Lord, his priestly model and guide (cf. *General Audience*, June 2, 1993, No. 4). A committed prayer-life brings the gift of wisdom, with which “the Spirit leads the priest to evaluate all things in the light of the Gospel, helping him to read in his own experience and the experience of the Church the mysterious and loving plan of the Father” (*Letter to Priests 1998*, No. 5). At a time when many demands are made on the priest’s time and energies, it is important to emphasize that one of his first duties is to pray on behalf of the people entrusted to him. This is his privilege and his responsibility, for he has been ordained to represent his people before the Lord and to intercede on their behalf before the throne of grace (cf. *General Audience*, June 2, 1993, No. 5). In this regard, I would emphasize again the importance in priestly life of faithfully praying the Liturgy of the Hours, the public prayer of the Church, every day. While the faithful are invited to participate in this prayer, following Christ’s recommendation to pray at all times without losing heart (cf. Lk 18:1), priests have received a special commission to celebrate the Divine Office, in which Christ himself prays with us and for us (cf. *Letter to Priests 1984*, No. 5). Indeed prayer for the needs of the Church and the individual faithful is so important that serious thought should be given to reorganizing priestly and parish life to ensure that priests have time to devote to this essential task, individually and in common. Liturgical and personal prayer, not the tasks of management, must define the rhythms of a priest’s life, even in the busiest of parishes.⁴ The celebration of the Eucharist is the most important moment of the priest’s day, the center of his life. Offering the Sacrifice of the Mass, in which the unique sacrifice of Christ is made present and applied until he comes again, the priest ensures that the work of redemption continues to be carried out (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 13). From this unique Sacrifice, the priest’s entire ministry draws its strength (cf. *ibid.*, 2) and the People of God receive the grace to live truly Christian lives in the family and in society. It is important for Bishops and priests not to lose sight of the intrinsic value of the Eucharist, a value which is independent of the circumstances surrounding its celebration. For this reason, priests should be encouraged to celebrate Mass every day, even in the absence of a congregation, since it is an act of Christ and the Church (cf. *ibid.*, 13; *Code of Canon Law*, c. 904). In order that the Eucharist may fully produce its grace in the life of your communities, specific attention also needs to be given to promoting the Sacrament of Penance.

Priests are the special witnesses and ministers of God's mercy. At no other time can they be as close to the faithful as when they lead them to the crucified and forgiving Christ in this uniquely personal encounter (cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, 20). To be the minister of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a special privilege for a priest who, acting in the person of Christ, is permitted to enter into the drama of another Christian life in a singular way. Priests should always be available to hear the confessions of the faithful, and to do so in a way that allows the penitent's particular situation to unfold and be reflected upon in the light of the Gospel. This fundamental task of the pastoral ministry, directed to intensifying the union of each individual with the Father of mercies, is a vital dimension of the Church's mission. It should be the subject of study and reflection in priests' gatherings and in courses of continuing formation. To cut oneself off from the Sacrament of Penance is to cut oneself off from an irreplaceable form of encounter with Christ. So, priests themselves should receive this sacrament regularly and in a spirit of genuine faith and devotion. In this way, the priest's own constant conversion to the Lord is strengthened, and the faithful see more clearly that reconciliation with God and the Church is necessary for authentic Christian living (cf. *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 53).⁵ As teachers of the faith, priests play a direct role in responding to the great challenge of evangelization facing the Church as we prepare to enter the third Christian millennium. The Gospel we preach is the truth about God and about man and the human condition: the people of our time want to hear this truth in all its fullness. Thus the Sunday homily requires careful preparation on the part of the priest, who is personally responsible for helping the faithful to see how the Gospel sheds light on the path of individuals and of society (cf. *General Audience*, April 21, 1993, No. 5). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is an excellent resource for preaching, and by using it priests will help their communities to grow in knowledge of the Christian mystery in all its inexhaustible richness, and so help them to be grounded in true holiness and strengthened for witness and service (cf. *Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday*, 8 April 1993, No. 2). The parish is a "family of families" and should be organized to support family life in every way possible. My own experience as a young priest in Krakow taught me how much the assistance that priests can give to young couples as they prepare for the responsibilities of married life is also of great benefit to their own priestly spirituality. Priests are called to a unique form of spiritual fatherhood and can come to a deeper appreciation of the meaning of being a "man for others" through their pastoral care of those striving to live out the requirements of self-giving and fruitful love in Christian marriage. It is the priest's task to lead the faithful to spiritual maturity in Christ, so that they may respond to the call to holiness and fulfill their vocation to transform the world in the spirit of the Gospel (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 36). In collaborating closely with the laity, priests must encourage them to see the Gospel as the principal force for the renewal of society - the vast and complex world of politics and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 70). A priest need not be an expert in all these things, but he should be an expert in discerning the "higher gifts" which the Holy Spirit abundantly pours out for the building of the Kingdom (cf. 1 Cor 12:31), and he should help his people apply those gifts in advancing a civilization of love.⁶ A Bishop cannot fail to be personally involved in the promotion of vocations to the priesthood, and he needs to encourage the whole community of faith to play an active role in this work. "The time has come to speak courageously about priestly life as a priceless gift and a splendid and privileged form of Christian living" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 39). Experience shows that when the invitation is made, the response is generous. A priest's pastoral contact with young people, his closeness to them in their problems, his attitude of openness, benevolence and availability, are all part of authentic youth ministry. A priest is a true spiritual guide when he helps young people to make important decisions about their lives, and especially when he helps them to answer the question: what does Christ want of me? More needs to be done to ensure that all priests are convinced of the fundamental importance of this aspect of the ministry. In the promotion and discernment of priestly vocations, there is no substitute for the presence of a committed, mature and happy priest with whom young people can meet and talk.⁷ As

Bishops, you must explain to the faithful why the Church does not have authority to ordain women to the ministerial priesthood, at the same time making clear why this is not a question of the equality of persons or of their God-given rights. The Sacrament of Holy Orders and the ministerial priesthood are given by God as a gift: in the first place, to the Church; and then to the individual called by God. Thus Ordination to the ministerial priesthood can never be claimed by anyone as a right; no one is “due” Holy Orders within the economy of salvation. That discernment belongs, finally, to the Church, through the Bishop. And the Church ordains only on the basis of that ecclesial and episcopal discernment. The Church’s teaching that only men may be ordained to the ministerial priesthood is an expression of fidelity to the witness of the New Testament and the constant tradition of the Church of East and West. The fact that Jesus himself chose and commissioned men for certain specific tasks did not in any way diminish the human dignity of women (which he clearly intended to emphasize and defend); nor by doing so did he relegate women to a merely passive role in the Christian community. The New Testament makes it clear that women played a vital part in the early Church. The New Testament witness and the constant tradition of the Church remind us that the ministerial priesthood cannot be understood in sociological or political categories, as a matter of exercising “power” within the community. The priesthood of Holy Orders must be understood theologically, as one form of service in and for the Church. There are many forms of such service, as there are many gifts given by the same Spirit (*1 Cor 12:4-11*). The Churches - in particular the Catholic and Orthodox Churches - which set sacramentality at the heart of the Christian life, and the Eucharist at the heart of sacramentality, are those which claim no authority to ordain women to the ministerial priesthood. Conversely, Christian communities more readily confer a ministerial responsibility on women the further they move away from a sacramental understanding of the Church, the Eucharist, and the priesthood. This is a phenomenon that needs to be explored more deeply by theologians in collaboration with the Bishops. At the same time, it is indispensable that you continue to pay attention to the whole question of how women’s specific gifts are nurtured, accepted, and brought to fruition in the ecclesial community (cf. [*Letter to Women*](#), 11-12). The “genius” of women must be ever more a vital strength of the Church of the next millennium, just as it was in the first communities of Christ’s disciples.⁸ Dear Brother Bishops, through you I would like to reach out to all the priests of the United States, to thank them for the holiness of their lives and for their untiring zeal in helping the faithful to experience God’s saving love. The joyful and responsible witness of your priests is an extraordinary tribute to the vitality of the Church in your Dioceses. I invite you and them to renew each day your love for the priesthood and always to see in it the pearl of great price for which a man will sacrifice all else (cf. Mt 13:45). I pray especially for those who are experiencing difficulties in their vocation, and I entrust their worries and cares to the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer. As we celebrate today the Feast of the Ascension, we rejoice in the Lord’s glory at the right hand of the Father and we look towards the approaching Feast of Pentecost. I invoke a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon you and upon the priests, Religious and laity of your Dioceses. May the Paraclete who guides the Church in the task of evangelization renew his sevenfold gift in your hearts, so that with total fidelity you may love and serve the particular Churches entrusted to your care. With my Apostolic Blessing.

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