



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF BULGARIA**

Saturday, 7 November 1998

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. For the second time since the changes have taken place in your country and throughout Eastern Europe, I welcome you with great joy to Rome where you have come to carry out your *ad limina* visit, thus tangibly expressing your communion with the Successor of Peter. I thank your President for his words just now. In recent years, you have been anxious to equip your communities with the necessary material and pastoral structures for the good of the faithful and of the whole Church. I thank you for this commitment and for your many efforts which, I am certain, are beginning to bear fruit that will be even more abundant in the future. Wherever a Christian presence emerges or is reborn, through the indispensable freedom of persons and peoples the hope of believers is strengthened, as they feel ever more motivated to build up the ecclesial community day after day and, at the same time, to take part in social life, enlivened as they are by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

2. Through you, I would like to encourage the priests, religious and lay people, who are always active in the service of the Gospel. I am pleased with the growth in the number of faithful, a sign of the vitality of your communities. They feel the need, in order to be witnesses of Christ in their daily life, to receive the sacraments more frequently and to take a more active part in the Sunday liturgy. In this intimate relationship with Christ, they will find the strength and daring to fulfil their baptismal vocation in their personal, family and social life. It is particularly important that they be supported in order to face the problems posed by civil society and to make their contribution to the moral rebuilding of society, marked by the era of totalitarian ideologies whose burden still weighs on consciences, and to the management of the *res publica*, in a spirit of fraternal collaboration with all their fellow citizens. A serious study of the Church's social teaching will be a precious help to them.

3. As I rejoice with you in the first fruits of your pastoral decisions, I also give thanks for the pastors and faithful who, in the trial and night of persecution as well as in their endless sufferings, preserved their faith and fought the good fight.

May their witness and the gift they have made of their life in martyrdom be seeds of the Good News and examples to our contemporaries! One of these witnesses, a symbol of them all, is the Bishop-martyr Vincent Eugene Bossilkov, whom I had the joy to beatify on 15 March last. In a letter written between the end of 1948 and the beginning of 1949, he wrote: "Our bloodstains will pave the way to a splendid future; and even if we will not see it ourselves, others will reap what we sowed in suffering". This treasure is put into the hands of the pastors and faithful of Bulgaria so that they may safeguard it and present it to the people as a way of freedom and life.

The beatification of Bishop Bossilkov has rightly been an experience of deep joy for your communities; the exaltation of one of their sons to the glory of the altars is the recognition of a local Church's fidelity to Christ and to the See of Peter. The saints and confessors of the faith teach us that the path leading to God's victory in human life consists in the willingness to collaborate with his grace, for it is God "who gives the growth" (1 Cor 3:7). This collaboration, which is precisely the path of spiritual life, is an essential factor in Christian life at the time when we are preparing to enter the Great Jubilee. Personal conversion and the return to God are indispensable conditions for the transformation of hearts and interpersonal and social relations, so as to establish an era of justice and peace. "Everything ought to focus on the primary objective of the Jubilee: *the strengthening of faith and of Christian witness*. It is therefore necessary to inspire in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbour, especially the most needy" (Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 42). I hope that through the commitment of all people of goodwill, the third millennium may be the millennium of freedom in the truth, because only the truth sets us truly free and enables us to set out on the path of happiness to which we aspire. "Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery", as I recently recalled in my Encyclical *Fides et ratio* (n. 90). Christ the Lord is the Way; he heals our internal and external wounds and restores in us the divine image which we have obscured by sin.

4. Among the more essential missions of the ecclesial community is attention to the family. Marriage is the basic institution of society and of the Church. It is important to help the younger generations discover the joy of building a lasting relationship with a person through commitment in fidelity, which strengthens love and enables the spouses to find fulfilment. The gift of self to another in marriage also disposes each to give his life without reserve in a responsible attitude, thereby accomplishing the mission received from the Creator: to accept every new life, to raise children with joy and respect so that they become adult Christians who can take part in the life of their country. It is indispensable that children's education be based on the teaching of a hierarchy of truly authentic values, and not dictated by fashion or mere personal interest.

Society will gradually evolve through the deep transformation of families, called to live moral values and pass them on to young people. Everyone has witnessed the disastrous consequences of lack of respect for human life in recent decades. Your people have experienced this truth in their own flesh: if a new society is to be built, the cornerstone must be respect for life, for all life, particularly that which is defenceless. Thus in its present situation your country is called, through a salutary moral impulse, to resist the undiscerning attraction of the consumer society, moral relativism, withdrawal into self, apathy, the lack of respect for life; these attitudes must give way, on the part of Christians, to taking deliberate steps on the path of holiness and to an ever greater commitment of solidarity towards their brothers and sisters. All people of goodwill must remember that the human person is the centre of social life and that his fundamental dignity must be respected. The struggle for true freedom comes through the protection of every human being, particularly the smallest

and the poorest.

Of course among your married compatriots, some will encounter difficulties in their conjugal and family life. As I pray for these troubled families, I invite them to revive the enthusiasm of their initial commitment: fidelity, accepted not as a burden but as a joyous choice, will make it possible to overcome the fears and incomprehensions which have taken root, day after day, to become the source of true maturation and a deep experience of happiness. As Pastors, with the help of the clergy and catechists, it is your task to support parents and intensify catechesis among the young, as well as to continue to provide suitable preparation for marriage. The discovery of the Christian mystery and the truth about human love will help young people in their spiritual and human growth.

5. To deal effectively with pastoral realities as they are in your country, priests, despite being overburdened by the work that sometimes confronts them, should increase their efforts with a view to proclaiming the Gospel and initiation to the sacraments. By guarding the flock entrusted to their care, they will also have at heart to pursue collaboration with lay people, who, by virtue of their Baptism, have a specific and active role in the Church's mission. Through their generous availability and competence in various areas, they will be able to make a valuable contribution under the direction of their Bishops.

The shortage of priests is one of your concerns. I encourage you to continue to develop the vocations ministry in schools, catechesis and families, so that young people will hear God's call. The witness of the clergy is essential in order to give young people a desire to commit themselves on the path of the priesthood. By the example of their joyous life, spiritual direction and other suitable initiatives, priests will be able to inspire in youth the desire to make themselves available, to make a courageous choice to follow Christ in accordance with God's will (cf. *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests*, n. 32a). This time of initial discernment must be extended in a serious preparation for the priestly ministry by profound philosophical and theological instruction, so as to be able to answer the many questions of the people of our time. "Philosophical subjects should be taught in such a way as to lead the students gradually to a solid and consistent knowledge of man, the world and God. The students should rely on that philosophical patrimony which is forever valid, but should also take account of modern philosophical studies" (Decree on the Formation of Priests *Optatam totius*, n., 15); in the same way, the Council continues, "theological subjects should be taught in the light of faith, under the guidance of the Magisterium of the Church" (ibid., n. 16). Indeed, it is thanks to these well-trained priests that the Church will be able to proclaim the Gospel to all cultures.

6. You come from a land where for centuries the traditions of East and West have met in their common praise of the Lord. However, you are all descended from the evangelization by the great work of Sts Cyril and Methodius who, with their extraordinary charism brought the Good News as well as their specific culture to the Bulgarian people. This complementarity of Eastern and Latin traditions, which you experience personally in your Episcopal Conference, is a pressing invitation to unity for the two lungs of Europe.

If this unity is a duty for all the children of the Catholic Church, it is an inescapable commitment for everyone who believes in Christ. As I hoped it would be in the Apostolic Exhortation *Tertio millennio adveniente*, the Great Jubilee is "a promising opportunity for fruitful co-operation in the many areas which unite us; these are unquestionably more numerous than those which divide us" (n. 16). I consequently urge you to seek the means which will enable you to

strengthen the ties between the different Christian denominations, especially in communion with our Orthodox brothers and sisters. The sharing of gifts and our cultural and spiritual heritages can only enrich us mutually, to activate the deep Christian roots which belong to the history of your country and of the whole continent.

At the end of your visit, I ask you to convey the Pope's affectionate sentiments to your priests, religious and beloved faithful of Bulgaria, assuring them of my prayer. I entrust the trials and hopes of the Catholic Church in Bulgaria to the maternal intercession of the Virgin Mary. To you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, and to all those whose Pastors you are, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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