



The Holy See

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

21 November 1998 Your Eminence,

*Dear Brother Bishops,*1. In the peace of the Risen Lord, I greet you, the Bishops of New Zealand, on the occasion of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. Your visit has a special significance and intensity since it coincides with your participation in the Special Assembly for Oceania of the Synod of Bishops, centred on Christ the light of the nations and the hope of every people and every age. You and your brother Bishops from Australia, the Pacific and Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands are gathered to reflect on what it means at the approach of the Third Millennium to "walk his way, tell his truth and live his life". It is my earnest hope that you will live these days with great joy and encouragement, knowing that through the grace of Jesus Christ "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of darkness into his own wonderful light" (1 Pt 2:9). A particularly significant part of your *ad Limina* visit is your prayer at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, whose "memory" in this City continually reminds the whole Church of what it means to be fully faithful to the Lord. In a special way it reminds the Successors of the Apostles just how much the Lord can ask of them. Here, as Bishops, you reflect once more on your ministry and how it involves commitment, sacrifice, and often much suffering for the sake of the Gospel. In fact, we are teachers of a great paradox: in the words of Saint Paul, "we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:23), to the point that "whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16:25). The Cross of Jesus Christ is the origin of the grace which sustains us; it is the source of our communion. It was only in "reproducing the pattern of the Lord's death" (Phil 3:10) that Peter and Paul overcame their differences (cf. Gal 2:11-21) and confirmed the unity which eventually led them to proclaim with a single voice the love which is greater than all that divides. As an elder brother, I invite you to take courage and, with the example of the Apostles before you, to go forth with renewed faith and love to do what Christ asks of you for the sake of those whom he has redeemed by the blood of his Cross.2. Without prayerful reflection on Christ's sacrifice on Calvary we shall never truly understand the relationship between the Church and the world. This was a key theme of the Second Vatican Council, which is so much in our minds and hearts during these days of the Synod when we relive something of the great grace of communion and brotherhood experienced by the Council Fathers. After the devastation of two World Wars and in a world shaken by the tragedies of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the Fathers of the Council sought to discern the new energies which the Holy Spirit was giving for a new evangelization. It should not be forgotten that a more intense dedication to the Church's mission was the Council's purpose, a purpose which has gained immeasurably in relevance in more recent years. The task of evangelization always prompts the question of the

relationship between the Church and the world; and this question is important, indeed crucial, for your ministry to the Church in New Zealand today. Your concern must be to inspire and guide new evangelizing energies in the context of a society which is largely secularized. This increasing secularization of society is a complex phenomenon and is not without positive aspects; but it can lead to a situation where the Christian community itself becomes secularized and the distinction between the Church and the world becomes unclear. The Council insisted that the Church's dialogue with culture needs to be taken seriously. But this does not mean that culture should be made absolute to the point where it is allowed consistently, as it were, to set the Church's agenda. When this happens, we have what the Servant of God Pope Paul VI, in his first Encyclical Letter, called "conformity to the spirit of the world", which, he insisted, cannot "enliven the Church and fit her to receive the power and strength of the Holy Spirit's gifts"; it is not what "makes the Church strong in her following of Christ"; it does not "kindle in the Church the desire to live in fraternal charity, nor make her better able to communicate the message of salvation" (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 51). No human culture can fully accommodate the Cross of Jesus Christ, which is always there to remind us that the distinction between the Church and the world is the paradoxically essential premise of the dialogue with culture for which the Council called.³ The roots of this paradox lie deep in the Bible, which elaborates a profound and powerful theology of holiness, divine and human. The Old Testament makes it clear that Israel is to be holy as God himself is holy (cf. Lev 19:2). This meant that Israel had to be distinct, just as God is infinitely distinct from the world, as the Bible stresses consistently in forging its doctrine of divine transcendence. But this otherness of Israel is not otherness for its own sake; it is neither introverted nor defensive. Just as God can make all things "good" (cf. Gen 1:31) precisely because he is above all things, so Israel is to be distinct for the sake of service. Just as the infinite transcendence of God makes possible the communication of the perfect love which culminates in Christ's Paschal Mystery, so in the Bible's understanding the holiness of God's people involves that critical freedom in relation to surrounding culture and cultures which makes possible real and genuine service of the human family. What is true of Israel in the Old Testament is no less true of the Church in the New Testament and indeed in our own time. The Church in many ways appears and is different; but this difference exists only for the sake of dialogue and service – in other words, for the sake of evangelization. The Council has sometimes been invoked to justify actions which actually go against its purpose, since they hinder or prevent the new evangelization which the Council sought. The problem with "conformity to the spirit of the world" is that the Church's uniqueness and transcendent nature are eroded through the mistaken understanding that dialogue and service require just such conformity, when in fact they call for the opposite. This general statement has certain quite specific implications for the life of the Church in New Zealand today.⁴ One of the most important of these is in the field of Catholic education. There is no doubt that the Catholic schools of your country have magnificently served not only Catholics themselves but society as a whole. They remain one of the great achievements in the story of evangelization in your land, and how can we fail to thank all those – especially the religious men and women – who have worked so splendidly to make your Catholic schools the prime resource which they are? It is again true that Catholic schools exist to implement a specific educational ideal, fully in accord with Catholic teaching and fostering a deepening of faith and commitment on the part of all concerned. If they were no different from other schools, they would scarcely warrant the resources devoted to them, since they would not play their proper part in the life of the Church. The specifically religious education which Catholic schools impart needs to be comprehensive, systematic and profound, providing a sound knowledge of the Catholic faith and a sure grasp of Catholic moral and social teaching. In this, the Catechism of the Catholic Church remains the point of reference, not only for the Bishops as the prime teachers of the faith but also for the priests and teachers who work with them. In bringing their students to the experience of God's love, Catholic schools must teach the first steps on the lifelong journey of prayer, the contemplative adventure which leads to friendship with Christ, sustains love of the Church, and inspires the

hope of eternal union with God. The distinctiveness of a Catholic school, however, reaches beyond catechesis and religious instruction to touch every aspect of education, transmitting that true Christian humanism which springs from the knowledge and love of Christ. Such an education guides the young to appreciate the wonder of human dignity and the supreme value of human life. It helps them understand the truth upon which I reflected in my recent Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*: faith needs reason if it is not to wither into superstition, and reason needs faith if it is to be saved from endless disappointment. This is because the human person is made for a truth which is absolute and universal – in the end, the truth of God – a truth that can be known with certainty. Indeed it is only in knowing the truth that the human heart will find rest, all the more so in these deeply restless times when the young are often led to mistake entertainment for joy and information for wisdom. In the end, the distinctly Catholic identity of your schools ought to be visible, not only in external signs, important as these are, but above all in their success in teaching justice, solidarity and true holiness of life based on a deep and abiding love of Christ and his Church.⁵ A necessary constructive difference can also be seen in the way the priestly and lay vocations are related in the life and mission of the Church; and this has important implications for seminary formation. A tendency to obscure the theological basis of this difference can lead to a faulty clericalizing of the laity and a laicizing of the clergy. It is of course possible for clergy to be separate in wrong and destructive ways, leading to a clericalism which is rightly to be rejected. But it is now clear that where the essential difference between the priestly and lay vocations is ignored, vocations to the priesthood all but disappear, and this is certainly not Christ's will nor the work of the Holy Spirit – just as it was certainly not the Council's intention when it encouraged greater lay involvement in the life of the Church. In the first place, what the Council called for was lay involvement in the world of the family, commerce, politics, intellectual and cultural life – which are the proper field of specifically lay mission. The Council therefore stressed the essential secularity of the lay vocation (*Lumen Gentium*, 31, cf. also *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 70, *Christifideles Laici*, 17). This does not mean that lay people have no special place or work to perform in the life of the Church *ad intra*: in many pastoral, liturgical and educational tasks, they clearly have. But the main focus of the lay vocation should be engagement in the world, while the priest has been ordained to be pastor, teacher and leader of prayer and sacramental life within the Church. His grace and responsibility is above all to act in the sacraments *in persona Christi*. Through you I send warm fraternal greetings to your priests, and I invite them to “rekindle the gift of God that is within them through the laying on of hands” (cf. 2 Tim 1:6), so that the passage to a new millennium will indeed signal a time of grace – a new springtime of the spirit – for themselves and the people they serve.⁶ Structural and constructive difference is also a part of the relationship between the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches and Communities. A false irenicism can compromise the ecumenical task as it was envisaged by the Second Vatican Council when it acknowledged the impulse given by the Holy Spirit to the search for unity. It is of course important to stress what we share in common, but true ecumenical dialogue – the need for which I have so often stressed – demands that we enter the dialogue conscious of the differences that count, and prepared to state and discuss them as clearly and as charitably as we can. Again, a superficial approach can only lead to the opposite of what the Council had in mind; it cannot lead to the true and enduring unity for which Christ prayed (cf. Jn 17:11). The greatest service which Catholics render to ecumenical dialogue is to remain faithful to their own distinctive identity. There is a paradox in this and at times it can demand difficult choices, as you well know from your own recent experience, but there is no other path which leads to the unity which has its roots in the life of the Trinity.⁷ In the end, all our reflections on holiness, on the need for separation for the sake of service, on distinctiveness for the sake of dialogue, lead us to be ever more aware of the need for a renewed sense of prayer and contemplation. The new evangelization has its roots in a deepening of the spiritual life, at the centre of which is contemplation and adoration of the Most Holy Trinity – the great mystery of the Godhead in which distinction of Persons is perfect union: *O Trinitas unitatis! O Unitas trinitatis!* To the extent that the People of God

have a clear sense of the mystery of God and of his saving presence in human affairs, they will feel the urgency of Christ's command to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth (cf. Mt 28:19). I encourage you to make a systematic effort in your dioceses and parishes to open new doors to the experience of Christian prayer and contemplation: all the baptized are called to be holy as God himself is holy. The contemplative communities already existing in New Zealand can be an example and an inspiration. Dear Brother Bishops, faced with all the many responsibilities of your ministry, your confidence must ever rest in the Holy Spirit who comes to help us in our weakness (cf. Rom 8:26). May the Spirit of God move over Aotearoa, the Land of the Long White Cloud, infusing the energies which the Church in New Zealand will need if she is to celebrate in truth and joy the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and fulfil her unique mission of service to the people of your country. Entrusting the entire household of God in New Zealand to the loving care of Mary, Assumed into Heaven, I gladly impart to you and to the priests, religious and lay faithful my Apostolic Blessing.

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