



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday 11 December 1999

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to receive you today, on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit, during which you have once again had the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul and to express your communion with the Bishop of Rome and the universal Church. All this will help you to renew your sense of mission in leading the ecclesial community in the Dominican Republic, which I have had the joy of visiting three times and remember very fondly.

I thank Cardinal Nicolás de Jesús López Rodríguez, Archbishop of Santo Domingo and President of the Dominican Episcopal Conference, for his kind words on behalf of you all, expressing your affection and at the same time sharing with me the concerns and hopes of the Church in your country, as well as the desires and anxieties that are on your mind.

When you return to your Dioceses, please convey the Pope's affectionate greetings to your priests, religious and lay faithful, whom I remember in my prayer that they may grow constantly in their faith in Christ and in their commitment to the new evangelization.

2. The Church in your nation has marked some important moments in recent years in which two new Dioceses, Puerto Plata and San Pedro de Macorís, were created. She has also held the First Dominican Council, which has made a major contribution to increasing among you, the Bishops, a communion and sharing of pastoral concern. This and other initiatives, such as the National Pastoral Plan, are a sign of unity and at the same time are required by the current circumstances in which there seems to be an ever greater need "to pool resources and aspirations in order to

promote both the common good and the good of individual Churches" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 36).

In the effort to revitalize Christian life among your people, you cannot forget the crucial role of priests, your co-workers in proclaiming the Gospel, who carry out their ministry with dedication and generosity, sometimes in circumstances which are far from easy. You should show them, especially those most lonely or in greatest need, constant concern and closeness, so that they can all live a worthy and holy life in conformity with their vocation and show themselves to be men of God fully consecrated to the service of the Gospel, without yielding to the seductions of the world (cf. *Eph 4: 22*).

In addition, the pastoral care of vocations is still urgently necessary, however comforting the increase in vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life in recent years may be, because the ecclesial community is suffering from a shortage of priests. This pastoral care should always be based on the example given by priests and on their ability to communicate enthusiasm to young people by their total commitment to Christ and the Gospel, as well as on fostering in families an attitude of generosity and perseverance towards the Lord's call.

3. The consecrated life deserves special mention. Not only do your Dioceses receive the riches of the respective institutes' charisms, but also incalculable and in many cases vital help from their commitment, according to their specific identity, in the various apostolates of education, health care and social assistance. In this regard, I would like to recall once again how the history of the evangelization of America is interwoven with the witness of so many consecrated persons who proclaimed the Gospel and defended the rights of the indigenous peoples so that they would fully feel they were children of God. However, the contribution of the consecrated life to building up the Church should not be measured on its activities or external effectiveness alone. For this reason, together with the other forms of consecration, the contemplative life must also be held in ever higher esteem and promoted by diocesan Bishops, priests and faithful, so that consecrated persons can "be fully integrated in the particular Church to which they belong, fostering communion and mutual collaboration" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 43).

4. In your quinquennial reports you have stressed the need to have well-formed adult lay people who are authentic Gospel witnesses. In your nation, which is currently undergoing a period of renewal and of profound changes which affect the various sectors of society, it is urgently necessary to be able to rely on the witness and activity of well-formed lay people who are ready to be involved in their particular fields, such as the family, work, culture or politics.

Therefore a continual and systematic formation is first required, which will make them aware of their dignity as baptized persons and of the commitment this entails, and give them a thorough knowledge of the teaching of the Church and of her Magisterium. Indeed, it is only with sound ethical principles that one can promote moral values, especially in a society where a large percentage of the population lives in conditions of extreme poverty, with a high rate of

unemployment especially among young people, an increase in violence and corruption almost as a way of life - all of which are factors whose direct impact is moral degradation and phenomena such as single teenage mothers or the employment and exploitation of minors.

5. One of the great challenges confronting your society is the weakening of the family institution, which is leading to a decrease in religious marriages and a consequent increase in civil marriages, to numerous divorces and to the spread of abortion and a contraceptive mentality. Without being resigned to habits that are sometimes widespread, you must vigorously respond to this situation with more effective catechesis and instruction, which will inculcate the Christian ideal of faithful and indissoluble conjugal communion, a true way of holiness and open to procreation. In this task parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their children, to whom, as a "domestic church", they also pass on the great gift of faith.

In this regard we must also remember the need to respect the inalienable dignity of women, who have an irreplaceable role in the family, in the Church and in society. Indeed, it is sad to note that "women still meet forms of discrimination" (ibid., n. 45), especially when they are the frequent victims of sexual abuse and male domination. This is why public institutions must be made aware, so that they they can "better support family life based on marriage, better protect motherhood and show greater respect for the dignity of all women" (ibid.).

6. The family situation has a decisive influence on the lifestyle of young people, thus conditioning the future of the Church and of society. Many young people are born in irregular situations and grow up without knowing a father figure, thus leading to serious educational problems which have repercussions on their personal maturity. They therefore need special support which will help them in their search for meaning in life and open horizons of hope that will enable them to overcome their experiences of frustration and free them from its consequences, such as resentment and delinquency. This is a task for everyone, in which young people must also be personally involved, making themselves apostles to their neediest contemporaries.

It is thus indispensable to promote a youth ministry that includes all categories of young people without any discrimination, so that the younger generation can be led to a personal encounter with the living Christ, on whom the true hope of a future of greater communion and solidarity is based. Rather than isolated actions, a formation process must be sought that is "constant and active, capable of helping them to find their place in the Church and in the world" (ibid., n. 47), and which therefore invites them to be courageous, faithful to their commitments, witnesses to their faith and leading players in the proclamation of the Gospel.

7. Within your country you also note that "the split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 20) and that certain ideologies or currents of thought, in one way or another, deny God or encourage people to distance themselves from him, relativizing moral values. In any case they tend to create an insurmountable gap between the

religious dimension and other aspects of human life. For this reason, the Church feels it a pressing duty in her work of evangelization not only to defend the truth about man, about his primacy over society and his openness to transcendence, but also to speak and teach in such a way that "the Gospel is proclaimed in the language and in the culture of its hearers" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 70).

At the same time, in carrying out this task we must avoid the risk that an excessive attachment to certain cultures and traditions will ultimately relativize the Christian message or empty it of meaning. For "it must not be forgotten that the paschal mystery of Christ, the supreme manifestation of the infinite God within the finitude of history, is the only valid point of reference for all of humanity on its pilgrimage in search of authentic unity and peace" (*ibid.*, n. 70).

8. As the opening of the Holy Door which will inaugurate the Great Jubilee is now so close, I encourage you, dear Brother Bishops, together with the entire pilgrim Church in the Dominican Republic, to see that this Year of Grace be a powerful impulse of spiritual renewal for both individuals and communities. I would also like the experience of the First Dominican Council with its pastoral measures and norms to be for each and every one of your Dioceses an opportunity for strengthening faith, arousing hope and spreading boundless love.

I place all these hopes and pastoral projects at the feet of Our Lady of Altagracia, patroness of the Dominican Republic, that she may always accompany and protect all her sons and daughters with her motherly love in an atmosphere of solidarity and fraternal harmony, as I affectionately impart to them my Apostolic Blessing.