



# The Holy See

---

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF BOSNIA AND HERCEGOVINA  
DURING THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT TO ROME**

*Friday, 15 January 1999*

*Your Eminence,*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. *"I have made myself a slave to all.... I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor 9:19, 23).*

I greet you with these words of St Paul, dear Pastors of the Church in Bosnia and Hercegovina who have come *ad limina Apostolorum* to visit the Successor of Peter.

I thank Cardinal Vinko Puljić for the courteous words he addressed to me on your behalf. He recalled the joys and hopes, the anguish and fears which have marked the life of the Church and of your homeland in this last decade of the second millennium. I have also had occasion to feel part of the events which have occurred in your region from 1991 to this day. In this regard, I would like to recall the Pastoral Visit I was finally able to make on 12 and 13 April 1997. It was an unforgettable experience, which gave me a concrete opportunity to observe the devastating effects of the war and, at the same time, the people's determination to resume normal life. Nor can I forget the Holy See's many interventions for the sake of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation in that region, which I hope will become, along with the whole of South-Eastern Europe, a serene home of peace where the dignity and rights of all are respected.

I admire the spiritual strength of your ecclesial communities in facing great trials and sacrifices during the recent conflict and in this difficult post-war period, in order to remain faithful to Christ and to the mission he has entrusted to his disciples in every age. With your priests, you have done all you could so "that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved" (Gal 2:5), even at the cost of life.

2. Today I want to urge you to persevere on this path, and through you I would like to encourage your priests to continue

servicing their brothers and sisters with tireless generosity and in full fidelity to their vocation. Indeed, through sacred ordination they share in your ministry and are your chief co-workers (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, nn. 2, 4) and closest helpers and advisers (cf. *ibid.*, n. 7; *Lumen gentium*, n. 28), beloved brothers and friends (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 28). The Second Vatican Council clearly explains the special role of priests when it recalls that "all priests, then, whether diocesan or religious, by reason of the sacrament of Orders and of the ministry correspond to and cooperate with the body of Bishops and, according to their vocation and the grace that is given them, they serve the welfare of the whole Church" (*ibid.*).

The Council also says that priests are called "to live with the rest of men as with brothers" (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 3). Totally dedicated to the work for which the Lord called them (cf. Acts 13:2), they act "as fathers in Christ" (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 9), models of the flock entrusted to their care (cf. 1 Pt 5:2-4), looking after all its members but especially the poor and the weakest (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 6), after the Lord's example.

3. Thanks be to God, your Churches do not lack vocations of special consecration, both male and female. Indeed, we are witnessing a providential blossoming of them. They are a precious gift and a great spiritual treasure for the Christian community, through which the baptized are helped to respond with greater generosity to the common call to holiness.

In the variety of charisms, consecrated persons are called to devote themselves without reserve to bearing Gospel witness in the various areas of ecclesial and social life. However, if this witness is to yield the desired fruits, apostolic activities must be suitably adapted to the Church's current needs and organized in full communion with the Pastors of the Diocese. I pray the Lord that the vital energy which has marked the Church in Bosnia and Hercegovina down the centuries will not fade, but rather increase. Here I would like to recall the contribution made by religious, first of all by the Franciscan Friars, to preserving the Catholic faith during the more than four centuries of Ottoman occupation. The memory of the past is a prophetic spur constantly to seek forms in keeping with the times to help Christian people to grow and mature in fidelity to the Gospel and in charity, avoiding everything that could weaken the Church's unity or create confusion or scandal among the faithful.

4. I know that the aim of your constant pastoral efforts is that all pastoral workers in Bosnia and Hercegovina will faithfully carry out the directives of the Second Vatican Council and docilely follow the canonical norms, in continuity with the great Catholic tradition. Without doubt, the harmony of apostolic goals and the close collaboration of all, priests, consecrated men and women and lay people under the diligent guidance of their Bishops, will bear abundant fruits of faith, love and holiness. This will not only help the Church by orienting her courageously to the future, but also civil society.

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, you have primary responsibility for the Church's pastoral care: it is your task to direct it, by virtue of the Gospel mandate received with episcopal ordination, in full communion with the Successor of Peter, heir to a "sure charism of truth" (St Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 26, 2: PG 7, 10, 53). St Ignatius of Antioch teaches that "wherever the Bishop is, there too is the Church" (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, VIII, 2). If pastoral work, however interesting, is not in line with these basic principles, it runs the risk of having a negative influence on the healthy development of the whole ecclesial body, even if those who promote it are convinced that they are acting in the name of God, for the good of the faithful and of the Church herself.

I keenly hope that it will be possible to find peaceful, satisfactory solutions to problems concerning the organization of apostolic activities. This is essential, if all pastoral workers are to devote their energies with renewed enthusiasm to the service of the Gospel. The irreplaceable ministry of priests and the prophetic witness of consecrated persons should be joined with the courageous activity of the lay faithful, who are also called to be a fearless and effective presence in your country, through action that is faithful to the apostolic teaching, with the support of frequent recourse to the sacraments.

This is the vocation of all the faithful, whatever social category they belong to: farmers or business people, merchants or those involved in the service, cultural or political sectors. Their apostolic presence, of course, calls for appropriate Christian formation, which is the fruit of constant, systematic commitment.

5. In listening to you, Venerable Brothers, at the meetings we have had during this ad limina visit, I have clearly understood that the primary task facing the Church in Bosnia and Hercegovina after the recent devastation is to organize life in the Dioceses and parishes. At the same time, you must continue to help the local peoples to rebuild everything that was destroyed by the fury of war, and offer them the hope of a prosperous and peaceful future. I would like to encourage you in this difficult task that is sometimes hampered by your country's complex situation, over which you unfortunately have little influence. I am well aware of your Churches' commitment to helping all communities to resume their normal life. Continue to defend the inalienable rights of every individual and every people, as you have done since the beginning of the deadly conflict, whose aftermath has been hatred and mistrust, death and refugees, and the displacement of entire populations from the regions where they have lived for centuries.

How is it possible not to feel pain at the thought that the number of Catholics has been more than halved? How can we forget the devastation which has more or less affected every region, but particularly vast areas of the ecclesiastical territories of Banja Luka and Sarajevo, ancient Vrhbosna, and part of the Dioceses of Trebinje-Mrkan and Mostar-Duvno?

While I rejoice in the many signs that peace is being consolidated, I cannot fail to mention the shadows that are a cause for concern. In the first place, the failure to solve the thorny problem of the return of refugees, as well as the unequal treatment of the three religious components of Bosnia and Hercegovina, especially with regard to full respect for their religious and cultural identity. I know of the obstacles encountered by Catholic communities in the areas of central Bosnia, Banja Luka and Posavina in their attempt to rejoin their own families. The principal issue on which the just solution of various other problems depends continues to be the creation of impartial conditions for the desired return of the refugees and exiles to their own homes, with the assurance of a peaceful future.

6. What is sought for Catholics also applies to other religious communities and ethnic groups throughout the territory of Bosnia and Hercegovina, without favouring one to the detriment of the others. They must all be guaranteed their basic rights; each must be offered the same opportunities. Truth, freedom, equality, justice, reciprocal respect and solidarity are the basis for a future of peace and progress for each and every one. A country of different peoples, cultures and religious communities is built on these values. It is the human person, every person, who is the most precious resource of any country.

May the eve of the third millennium in Bosnia and Hercegovina be marked by peace and respect for the inalienable rights

of every person and every social group. May all the peoples of your country see their dignity and legitimate aspirations to equality and development promoted. May each family look with serenity to the future, a future of freedom, solidarity and peace.

7. Dear Brothers, continue to promote and support the method of dialogue in the spirit of Pastors, with respect for the field of action proper to political leaders, who are entrusted with precise tasks for the organization of human society. Trustfully pursue the ecumenical commitment with your Orthodox brothers and sisters, as well as your dialogue with the Jewish and Islamic communities. I know how much you have done in this regard during the most difficult moments of recent years. May the enthusiasm of that period continue today and be transformed into concrete service to the human person and the cause of peace.

Be tireless messengers of forgiveness and reconciliation. The Church knows that this work is an integral part of proclaiming the Gospel and of bearing witness to the heavenly Father's mercy. In this context and in view of the Great Jubilee, your initiative of proclaiming 1999 the "Year of Reconciliation" is praiseworthy. I recalled in Marija Bistrica on 3 October 1998 that "to forgive and to be reconciled means *to purify one's memory* of hatred, rancour, the desire for revenge; it means acknowledging as a brother even those who have wronged us; it means not being overcome by evil but overcoming evil with good (cf. Rom 12:21)" (n. 5; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 7 October 1998, p. 2).

Commitment to the human person and his well-being is a Gospel commitment and is therefore part of the Church's mission in the world (Mt 25:34-46; Lk 4:18-19). In this light, the work of Caritas and the Church's implementation of social projects for individuals and needy families should be encouraged. However, as you offer the needy their daily bread, may you be constantly concerned to provide your brethren in the faith with the Bread of eternal life and to proclaim Christ to all as "*the Way, the Truth and the Life*" (cf. Jn 14:6).

8. May the light of Christ the Saviour, whom we recently contemplated in the mystery of Christmas, illumine the families and ecclesial communities of Bosnia and Hercegovina. In lovingly accepting God's saving word, may your Ecclesial Communities remain faithful to Christ until the mystery of God is fulfilled (cf. Rv 10:7), and be attentive to what the Spirit is saying to them in this epochal passage from the second to the third millennium.

May Mary, Mother of the Church and of redeemed humanity, obtain for all of you the gift of fidelity, harmony and hope. May you be accompanied in your tireless work and apostolic zeal by the Apostolic Blessing which I cordially impart to you and to your diocesan clergy, as well as to the religious and all the lay faithful entrusted to your pastoral care. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all" (Rv 22:21).

---

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana