



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE GERMAN BISHOPS ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Thursday, 18 November 1999

Your Eminence,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate!

1. It is a great joy for me to receive you here in the Apostolic Palace: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all"* (2 Cor 13: 13). With this greeting I offer you my best wishes for the *ad limina* visit which has brought you to Rome "to visit Cephas" (Gal 1: 18). At the tombs of the Princes of the Apostles our thoughts turn to Peter and Paul, the founders "of the very great and ancient Church" (St Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III, 3, 2). Although different by character and vocation, they were united in witnessing to their faith. Together they exhausted themselves for the Gospel at the service of God and man.

Despite moments of tension, they never broke off their relations, indeed, they gave one another "the right hand of fellowship" (Gal 2: 9). In fact, they knew that it was the Lord himself who had made Peter the universal Pastor of his flock (cf. *Jn* 21: 15-17) and the visible foundation of the Church's unity (cf. *Mt* 16: 18).

In this same spirit of fraternal and hierarchical communion, I would like to continue the reflection I began with the previous group of Bishops from your country on the Church as the "universal sacrament of salvation" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 48; *Gaudium et spes*, n. 45). After having emphasized the role of the Church in the civil society of reunified Germany, today I would like to reflect with you on the nature and mission of your pastoral ministry in the Church understood as the "sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 1).

2. As the Son was sent by the Father, so he himself sent out the Apostles, telling them: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (*Mt* 28: 18-20). Christ's solemn mission to proclaim the saving truth was handed down by the Apostles to their

successors, the Bishops. They have been sent to carry it out to the very ends of the earth (cf. *Acts* 1: 8), "in order to build the body of Christ" (*Eph* 4: 12) which is the Church.

They carry out their mission in communion with the Bishop of Rome. Indeed, as Successor of Peter he is invested by divine institution with supreme, full, immediate and universal power in the Church for the care of souls (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 2). Since his mission as Pastor of all the faithful is to safeguard the common good of the whole Church and the good of the individual Churches, he "presides in love over the universal community" (cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Rom.*, Introd.).

As "Vicar of Christ's love" (St Ambrose, *Expositio in Luc.*, bk. X), I recently felt it my duty to resolve the disagreements that had arisen among you and in the particular Churches entrusted to your care, seeking to reharmonize individual voices in "the one great symphony for life" to which the Catholic Church must remain faithful in every time and in every place. I pray that the Church in Germany will bear a clear, unanimous witness to the Gospel of life. I also count on your prayers that I may faithfully fulfil my ministry as the first guardian of the truth for the good of the Church throughout the world. Perhaps Providence has entrusted the Chair of Peter to me to be a passionate "advocate of life" on the threshold of the third millennium. In fact, I had to experience from an early age, during a particularly dark chapter in the history of this tormented century, how human life was trampled upon and systematically destroyed not very far from my native town of Wadowice!

3. The Bishops are called by the Holy Spirit to take the Apostles' place as Pastors of their particular Churches. To this end, they are invested with an authority of their own which "far from being damaged by the supreme and universal power, is much rather defended, upheld and strengthened by it" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 27). It is the Bishops' task, together with the Supreme Pontiff and under his authority, to continue the work of Christ, the eternal Shepherd. For Christ gave the Apostles and their successors the authority to *teach* all peoples, to *sanctify* them in the truth and to *lead* them (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 2).

As links in the noble chain of apostolic succession, you share in God's spiritual gift which the Apostles passed on to their co-workers (cf. *2 Tm* 1: 6-7). Through prayer and the laying-on of hands, upon each of you have been conferred the offices of teaching, sanctifying and governing, "which, however, of their very nature can be exercised only in hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 21).

Let us reflect together on what this requirement means for the Bishop. I reaffirm here what I pointed out as Bishop of Rome in my first Letter for Holy Thursday 20 years ago: "If we analyze carefully the conciliar texts, it is obvious that one should speak of a triple dimension of Christ's service and mission, rather than of three different functions. In fact, these functions are closely linked to one another, explain one another, condition one another and clarify one another" (*Letter*

to *Priests 1979*, n. 2).

4. Before reflecting on the threefold dimension of the pastoral ministry, I would first of all like to point out the centre on which all your activity should be focused: "The mystery of Christ as the basis of the Church's mission" (Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis*, n. 11). Anyone who participates in any way in the Church's mission must start from this basis in order to carry out in his work the task he has received. This applies in the first place to Bishops, who in a unique way have been "initiated", so to speak, into the mystery of Christ. Invested with the fullness of the sacrament of Orders, the Bishop is called to present and to live the whole mystery of Christ (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 12) in the Diocese entrusted to him. It is a mystery that contains "unsearchable riches" (Eph 3: 8). Let us cherish this treasure! Let us make it the pearl of our lives! Let us not tire of meditating on it to draw ever greater light and strength from it in the daily fulfilment of our ministry.

Since people respond more to the witness of our lives than to the force of our words, they want to meet in us people whose whole lives are directed towards Jesus Christ, "the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father" (*Jn* 1: 18). They hope that, like the Apostles, we too will pass on what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands (cf. *1 Jn* 1: 1): to hand on to others the faith we have experienced - this is the aim of the new evangelization.

Indeed, the task of Pastors is to present Christian doctrine and discipline "in a manner suited to the needs of the times, that is, so it may be relevant to those difficulties and questions which people find especial worrying and intimidating" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 13). Since the word of God is living and active (cf. *Heb* 4: 12), it will not fail to have an effect on those who possess the "obedience of faith" (cf. *Rom* 1: 5), in freedom and love. The "Credo" that every pastor recites in the *Professio Fidei* is thus essential and necessary for his effort to teach and live the truth of faith with openness, enthusiasm and courage.

5. In the Bishop's threefold ministry - as the Second Vatican Council teaches - the preaching of the Gospel has a certain priority. In particular, Pastors must be "witnesses of Christ to all people" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 11), "heralds of the faith who draw new disciples to Christ" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 25). As "workmen rightly handling the word of truth" (*2 Tm* 2: 15); we must pass on together what we have received. It is not a question of our own word, however learned, because we are not preaching ourselves but the revealed truth which must be faithfully transmitted in communion with the other members of the episcopal college.

What you have reported about your Dioceses shows that in carrying out your teaching ministry you encounter a cultural climate in which many of your contemporaries, out of suspicion or even hostility, resist the claim to certainty in the knowledge of truth. Today there is a very widespread mentality that tends to exclude questions about ultimate truths from public life and to restrict

religious faith and convictions about moral values to the private sphere. This process has reached the point that it seems justifiable to ask: What place is still accorded to God, to whom the fathers of your country's constitution felt explicitly obliged when, 50 years ago, they expressed at the beginning of the Fundamental Law the "awareness of their responsibility before God and men" (*Preamble to the Fundamental Law of the Federal Republic of Germany, 23 May 1949*)?

There is a risk that laws, which exert a powerful influence on thought as well as on human behaviour, will gradually become detached from their moral foundation. This would be to the detriment of the laws themselves: with the passing of time they would be considered merely a means for ordering society, without any reference to the objective moral order. In this situation I realize that it is not always easy for you to preach "the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation" (*Eph 1: 13*) with success.

Unfortunately, the psychological pressure exerted by certain sectors of civil society in Germany also leads the Catholic faithful to question the Church's teaching and discipline. In a climate of widespread religious individualism, some members of the Church even claim the right to decide for themselves which teachings to accept in matters of faith. They likewise ignore what they find personally unacceptable. But the teachings of the faith form an organic whole that does not allow such arbitrary distinctions. Whoever acts in this way cannot claim to be consistent with the faith he professes.

6. Dear Brothers, you know that it is the Bishop's fundamental duty as Pastor to invite the members of the particular Church entrusted to his care to accept the Church's authoritative teaching on faith and morals in all its fullness. We must not be discouraged if our message is not accepted everywhere. With the help of Christ who conquered the world (cf. *Jn 16: 33*), the most effective remedy against error is the calm and courageous proclamation of the Gospel "in season and out of season" (*2 Tm 4: 2*).

I express this hope particularly with the young in mind. Many of them are demanding about the meaning and form of their life, and would like to free themselves from religious and moral confusion.

Help them to do so! In fact, the younger generation is open and sensitive to religious values. They sense - although at times unconsciously - that religious and moral relativism do not bring happiness, and that freedom without truth is a deceptive illusion. In carrying out the Church's teaching office in union with your priests and assistants in the catechetical ministry, you should pay particular attention to conscience formation. Conscience must certainly be respected as man's "sanctuary", where he is alone with God whose voice can be heard in the depths of his heart (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 16). But you should remind your faithful just as zealously that conscience is a demanding tribunal whose judgement must always conform to the moral norms revealed by God and authoritatively proposed by the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Clear and unambiguous teaching on these matters will certainly have a positive influence on the necessary return to the sacrament of Reconciliation, which unfortunately is very much neglected today even in your country's Catholic regions.

7. Another fundamental task of Bishops is found in the office of sanctifying. "The Bishop is to be considered as the high priest of his flock from whom the life in Christ of his faithful is in some way derived and upon whom it in some way depends" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 41). In a sense, then, the Bishop is the first "liturgist" of his Diocese and the chief steward of the Mysteries of God. At the same time, it is up to him to direct, promote and oversee the liturgical life of the particular Church entrusted to him (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 15).

In this regard, I would like you to pay particular attention to the two fundamental sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. As soon as I was raised to the Chair of Peter, I approved the *Instruction on the Baptism of Children*, in which the Church confirmed the practice of infant Baptism, which has been in use since the beginning. In the pastoral practice of your local Churches you have rightly insisted on the need to administer Baptism only when there is a well-founded hope that the child will be brought up in the Catholic faith, so that the sacrament will bear fruit (cf. *CIC*, can. 868, 2). At times, however, the Church's guidelines are interpreted more strictly than they are meant to be. As a result, parents are told without sufficient reason that their child's Baptism must be postponed, or even refused. Prudence and pastoral charity suggest a more understanding attitude towards those who approach the Church with good intentions to request Baptism for their child.

The same pastoral charity should also restrain pastors from making demands that are not required by the Church's doctrine or law. It is right that parents should be properly prepared for the Baptism of their child by their pastor, but it is equally important that the first sacrament of Christian initiation should be seen primarily as God the Father's gift to the child. The free and unmerited nature of grace is never so evident as on the occasion of a child's Baptism: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 *Jn* 4: 10).

Moreover, we cannot speak of the Diocese's spiritual renewal without also discussing the Eucharist. An urgent task of your high-priestly office consists in emphasizing the vital role of the Eucharist as the "source and summit of the Christian life" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 11). The ministry of Bishops and priests not only culminates in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice, but the latter should also be the centre of life for all other members of Christ's Body. The shortage of priests and their unequal distribution, on the one hand, and the worrying reduction in the number of those who regularly attend Sunday Mass, on the other, are a challenge that your Churches have to meet. To react correctly it would be advisable to take into account the fundamental principle that the parish community must be a Eucharistic community; as such, it should be led by an ordained priest who, by virtue of his sacred power and the irreplaceable responsibility connected with it, offers the Eucharistic sacrifice *in persona Christi* (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 48). I realize that some of you -

even in traditionally Catholic regions - can no longer send a priest to every parish. Obviously, this situation requires a temporary solution so that communities are not left without care and thus threatened with increasing spiritual impoverishment. The fact that the religious and lay people you have appointed preside at Sunday Liturgies of the Word is praiseworthy in emergency situations, but this situation cannot be considered satisfactory in the long term. Indeed, the sacramental incompleteness of these services should prompt the whole parish community to pray the Lord even more insistently to send out labourers into his harvest (cf. *Mt 9: 38*).

8. Lastly, a word on the office of leadership entrusted to you. In carrying out this task, you should certainly keep before your eyes the image of the Good Shepherd who came not to be served but to serve (cf. *Mt 20: 28*). This is a demanding image, especially since those who must live up to it know they are taken from among men, and that as such they are prey to human weaknesses. But this very awareness can only cause them to show benevolent compassion to those entrusted to their pastoral care and leadership (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 27).

Above all, I ask you to be concerned for your first "housemates" in the local Churches, the priests, for whom as Bishops you are "the visible source and foundation of unity" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23).

The pastoral ministry is demanding because the visible results rarely seem to repay the efforts devoted to them, sometimes to the very limits of one's strength. Many pastors have the impression that they must work in an arid quarry rather than in the Gospel vineyard. What can we say of the growing number of older priests and the shortage of vocations that weigh heavily on the future of your Dioceses? I would like to encourage you to be even closer to your priests and seminarians. I know the burden of the daily commitments connected with your office. Nevertheless, with fatherly concern I would like to repeat the hopes expressed by the Second Vatican Council in such clear and sensitive words: "On account of this common sharing in the same priesthood and ministry, then, Bishops are to regard their priests as brothers and friends and are to take the greatest interest they are capable of in their welfare both temporal and spiritual.... They should be glad to listen to their priests' views and even consult them and hold conference with them about matters that concern the needs of pastoral work and the good of the Diocese" (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 7). "A Bishop should be compassionate and helpful to those priests who are in any kind of danger or who have failed in some respect" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 16).

Venerable Brothers! Take the opportunity to assure your priests that the Bishop of Rome is close to each and every one of them. Their presence is extremely important. Without priests, the Bishop would have no arms.

9. Dear Brothers! Teacher, high priest and leader - with these concepts I have offered you a few thoughts that are dear to my heart. They are meant to stimulate your reflection on the threefold pastoral office entrusted to you for the Church in your homeland. Aware of your great dedication in carrying out the episcopal ministry, I would like to conclude these words by expressing my

fraternal and grateful appreciation. May we be consoled in every situation by the thought that Jesus Christ did not take us into his service as managers, but consecrated us as stewards of his Mysteries.

So I entrust your life and your mission as the Shepherds of your flocks to the intercession of Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church. May an abundance of heavenly graces be poured out upon you and the priests, deacons, religious and lay people in your Dioceses, as a pledge of which I cordially impart to all my Apostolic Blessing.