



The Holy See

ADDRESS TO THE BISHOPS OF LITHUANIA DURING THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT

17 september 1999

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate!

1. Welcome ad Petri sedem! With great joy I meet you once again for this visit, provided by ecclesial practice to support communion and pastoral co-responsibility. Through you I greet your communities, the priests, the religious and lay people of the beloved land of Lithuania.

I thank Archbishop Audrys J. Backis for his kind words in which, as President of your Episcopal Conference, he expressed the sentiments of devotion that mark your relations with the Successor of Peter. Your land's profound unity with the Apostolic See has never been marred; rather, the great trial to which your country was subjected in this century has strengthened it.

Today's meeting offers us the opportunity to review the ground covered since 1993 when, during my Pastoral Visit to Lithuania, we rejoiced together in the new springtime God has granted to your Churches.

Memories take me back to the sentiments I felt then, to the warm welcome I received, the places I was able to visit: Vilnius, Kaunas, Siauliai, Siluva. How can I forget the deep emotion and unbounded joy of those moments? We could have made the psalmist's words our own: "Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy" (*Ps* 126: 1-2).

Cherish the witness of those who gave their lives

The *Via Crucis* was too long. So many children of your land were called to bear witness to Christ amid hardships, imprisonment, restrictions of every kind and even by the sacrifice of their lives. Now for your communities the freedom to profess your faith has become as it were a rebirth. The traditional symbols to which Catholic Lithuania looked even in her darkest hours have shone with new light, from the shrine dedicated to Our Lady of the Dawn Gate to the overwhelming Hill of Crosses, where your peoples' crosses were so often joined with the Cross of Christ. The Mother

and her divine Son have once again become the centre of Lithuanian life and culture, as they were during the best centuries of your history.

2. Being with you, dear Brothers, I could see with how much vitality the faith of Lithuanians overcame the hour of trial. Of course, as always happens in times of persecution, some yielded.

Still today, in your reports you stress that years of atheistic propaganda have had devastating effects which are hard to remedy. At the same time, however, the faith of many has been strengthened after passing through this crucible. We should not doubt then how mysteriously fruitful is suffering borne for Christ. No tear is lost in God's sight, as the psalmist again reminds us: "My tears are stored in your flask" (*Ps 56: 9*). I am not only thinking of the reward for those who acknowledged Christ before men and who will be acknowledged by him before the Father, as he promised (cf. *Mt 10: 32*). I am also thinking of the fruitfulness that appears throughout history, although we are not always able to see it visibly or to quantify it. "*Semen est sanguis Christianorum*" (Tertullian, *Apology*, 50). This is why the memory of those among you who witnessed to the point of giving their life should be cherished and sown as seed in the furrows of the present moment, so that it can guide your efforts today and sustain your hopes tomorrow. Catechesis should lead to mature faith

3. In fact, the Lithuanian Church faces challenges today that demand vigilance, generous effort and new creativity. Free now from the fetters of a totalitarian and anti-Christian State, faith is ensnared by the tentacles of a subtler aggression, represented by a seductive, worldly and hedonistic model of life that dominates the more economically developed countries. I have noticed how worried you are about this, especially when you look at the younger generation. Some of the ethical problems which are unfortunately spreading throughout the world - from the crisis of the family to the scant esteem for the value of life - are also having an effect in Lithuania. Even at the specifically religious level, faith is also being put to the test by the proliferation of sects. What I said during my last Pastoral

Visit remains very relevant in the light of the past five years: the new evangelization is the first and inescapable demand on Lithuanian pastoral ministry.

4. Thus I am pleased to note the awareness you show in this area, as well as your constant efforts to improve the *catechetical movement*. Genuine catechesis is not limited to imparting a patrimony of truths, rather it aims at introducing people to a full and conscious life of faith. It is important to proclaim the Gospel as "news", the "*Good News*", totally centred on the person of Jesus, the Son of God and Redeemer of man. Catechesis must help people to "meet" Jesus Christ, to converse with him and to immerse themselves in him. Without the vibrance of this encounter, Christianity becomes a soulless religious traditionalism which easily yields to the attacks of secularism or the enticements of alternative religious offerings. This encounter then, as experience confirms, is not fostered by dry "lessons" alone but rather, so to speak, "caught" by the power of a living witness.

Catechesis must rediscover all the warmth of the First Letter of John: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes ... we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 *Jn* 1: 1-3).

5. On this basis the methodological aspects concerned with designing formation courses that attend to each person's different situation and schedule acquire their full value. It is necessary to present the faith in a way adapted to those who are most distant. Equally important is a catechesis for those who already believe and receive the sacraments, one that is not limited to the formation of children but accompanies the Christian's development to full maturity. The praiseworthy "parish catechism schools" must therefore be open to the needs and methods of *continuing catechesis*. Careful attention to the complete transmission of the faith, today facilitated by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is offered as a reference-point for other catechetical tools, should be accompanied by that creativity and adaptation which are necessary for an authentic *pedagogy of faith*, as emphasized by the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997).

In this regard, the form of catechetical instruction differs from the academic teaching of religion (*ibid.*, nn. 73-75), which remains within the limits set by the school's own purposes, especially in the case of State schools. Catechesis goes much further, because in addition to the cultural dimension, it aims at forming the person of faith in full conformity with his option for Christ's Gospel. The whole Christian community, in all its various dimensions, is responsible for offering this formation. The education given by each family is fundamental.

Moreover, those new experiences inspired by the Holy Spirit in the springtime of the *ecclesial movements* which are enlivening the post-conciliar Church should be welcomed as a blessing.

When they work in full harmony with their Pastors, they can make an important contribution to the growth of Christian life, and Lithuanian Christianity will certainly benefit from its ability to combine the "nova et vetera", making the most of its traditions and opening itself to the new things brought about by God's Spirit.

With the help of these multiple resources, it will also be possible to rediscover classical forms of evangelization and pastoral leadership, such as "missions". These should certainly be adapted to the circumstances of our day, in order to reach the most varied groups of the faithful as well as those who have completely lost their faith. But when they are well organized, they continue to bear fruit, as I myself was able to see here in Rome, where we recently concluded the City Mission in preparation for the Great Jubilee.

6. There is no doubt, then, that the effectiveness of evangelization depends to a large extent on the *spiritual efforts of priests*, "prudent cooperators of the episcopal college" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 28). Dear Brothers, if it is up to you to be "heralds of the faith" and "authentic teachers" (*ibid.*, n.

25) among the flock entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit (cf. *Acts* 20: 28), only the grass-roots work of your priests can ensure that each Christian community is nourished by the Word of God and supported by the grace of the sacraments.

Thanks be to God, your communities have a good number of priests available. You yourselves, however, have told me that they are not always enough and many parishes lack a parish priest.

Therefore, I praise your efforts in the *pastoral care of vocations* to see that there will be a sufficient number of priests to meet the needs of the Lithuanian community and especially that they receive a good formation. For this it is necessary that *seminaries* provide a high-quality formation.

Your pastoral wisdom will be able to judge which decisions should be made in order to do this in the best way possible, with the cooperation of the various Dioceses. It is not difficult to find the right educational approach in the documents of the Council and the post-conciliar documents of the Magisterium for achieving the greatest possible balance between the need for a rigorous spiritual and theological formation and the equally important requirement of an integral human formation that is open and attentive to the needs of people today. Nor, along with priestly vocations, should the great opportunity offered by the *permanent diaconate* be forgotten. The Council has let us rediscover this ministry, which should be promoted not as something marginal or as a substitute for the possible lack of priests, but for the intrinsic value of this service to the People of God "in the diakonia of the liturgy, of the Gospel and of works of charity" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 29).

Catechists obviously play a specific and particularly praiseworthy role in the area of evangelization. I am pleased to note the care you are taking with their formation. And how could we overlook the service of *consecrated persons*? The Christian rebirth of Lithuania will draw ever greater advantage from promoting the religious life, provided that each institute knows how to combine fidelity to its own charism with active and heartfelt openness to pastoral communion with the local Churches (cf. *Vita consecrata*, n. 81).

7. Over and above specific pastoral roles, however, it is necessary to be deeply aware that the challenge of effective evangelization can only be met by calling on the prophetic task proper to all the baptized. It is time for Christian communities to become *communities of proclamation!*

In this perspective it is urgently necessary to form the laity, indeed, to promote a *lay spirituality* which will help lay Christians live deeply their vocation to holiness, "by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 31). It is the task of well-formed lay people to be a leaven in society, to defend those human and Christian values on which man's future depends. I am referring in particular to *respect for human life*, today more and more threatened by a culture of death disguised as a culture of freedom. I am also thinking of the *family*, which should be forcefully presented as a covenant of indissoluble love which unites man and

woman in a permanent way and makes them God's co-workers in begetting and rearing children.

There is a particularly urgent need in the young Lithuanian democracy for lay people to be involved in *politics*. This demands from Christians full consistency with the Gospel values presented in the Church's social teaching and, at the same time, their intelligent and responsible involvement in the complex circumstances of history. From this condition of Christian political action derives a necessary distinction between contexts and roles. As the Council taught us, the task of pastors is one thing, and the responsibility assumed by the lay faithful, personally or as a group, another (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 76). The confusion of roles would threaten to bring the Church into an area that does not belong to her, and although this can at times be justified by exceptional circumstances, it usually turns out to be counterproductive.

8. In fact, the true "secret" of the Church's significant presence in Lithuanian society is the formation of *mature lay people*, who will bear ever greater witness in society if they find their own place within the Christian community, receiving formation and support from it and at the same time offering services in keeping with the lay vocation. The laity cannot be passive subjects in the Church! To this end, the different expressions of the Christian community must be developed more and more as places of communion and co-responsibility, so that all the baptized are helped to become and to regard themselves as "adults" in the faith. In this process of maturation they can find support in those associations, some more traditional, others newer, which, under the guidance of the Pastors, offer them sound opportunities for formation by directing them to effective forms of witness.

Another place of growth are the *organs of participation* which the Second Vatican Council encouraged and which are now a well-established practice in the Christian community at both the diocesan and the parish level (cf. *CIC*, cann. 511; 536-537). It is not a question of imitating the parliamentary structures of civil society, but of expressing in the style proper to ecclesial life that sense of communion which is based on the conviction that, while the Spirit of God helps Pastors in their role as teachers and guides, it enlivens all the members of the Christian community, enriching it with their conscious, responsible and mature participation. Of great importance in this regard are *Diocesan Synods* which, celebrated in the form indicated by the current norms, also provide for the participation of lay people (*CIC*, can. 463, 5) and indeed enable the whole diocesan community to be involved in a "synodal process", except, obviously, for the role of the Bishop as the "sole legislator" (can. 466).

9. Dear Lithuanian Brothers, you are advancing with conviction on the path of these conciliar directives. Persevere in this direction, to provide new vitality for your communities. Open your hearts to trust. All you have achieved in these years is precious in God's eyes. A new phase is now beginning and the very occasion of the now imminent Great Jubilee is a providential opportunity to give enthusiasm to your pastoral commitment. It is necessary to sow abundantly and with hope-filled hearts. Let us remember the Gospel parable: the seed of the kingdom of God

grows in a mysterious way, under the Spirit's action, such that the sower himself is amazed (*Mk* 4: 27). Then if we are not allowed to see the results of our labours, we should remember that we are "unworthy servants" (*Lk* 17: 10), as the Gospel says, and always be ready to make ourselves God's instrument, because "neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 *Cor* 3: 7).

May this awareness always inspire you, dear friends. May your meeting with the Successor of Peter be an encouragement and an incentive to you. Tell your people of the Pope's affection for the entire Lithuanian community, and convey my greeting to one and all. I entrust the path that lies ahead to Mary most holy, "the Dawn Gate", and cordially impart my Blessing to you and to your faithful.