



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF NICARAGUA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 21 September 2001

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. At this last meeting of your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*, I have the joy of sharing with you the same faith in the risen Christ that accompanies us on our way through life and is living and present in the communities entrusted to your pastoral care. I also extend my affectionate greeting to the diocesan Churches over which you preside with such dedication and generosity.

I would like to express my gratitude to Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo, Archbishop of Managua and President of the Bishops' Conference, for his kind words to me on your behalf. At the same time, I share in your concerns and desires, and ask God who is rich in mercy to grant that this visit to Rome may be a source of blessings for all the priests, men and women religious and pastoral workers who collaborate so unselfishly with you in your apostolic work among our beloved Nicaraguan people.

Today's meeting makes me recall my second pastoral visit to Nicaragua in February 1996, to which I had so looked forward, when I arrived in your country as an apostle of the Gospel and a pilgrim of hope. It was a freer and more pleasant opportunity for Nicaraguan Catholics to meet with the Pope.

2. I am happy to learn of the pastoral programme for the Diocesan Synods of Managua and Estelí, and also to know that other dioceses are preparing similar initiatives. Celebrating these assemblies helps each particular Church realize that she is in a constant state of mission and must promote the new evangelization by improving the Christian formation of all her members and social and political development. Indeed, undertaking a renewed, effective catechesis that will

illumine the faith one professes as well as encouraging a more widely attended liturgy to help the faithful put their whole heart into living and celebrating it, are unavoidable challenges, if all believers are to progress towards holiness and one is to bring close to the Gospel those who have fallen away from or show indifference to the saving message of the Gospel.

The Church feels constantly challenged by Jesus' mandate to proclaim the Gospel to every creature (cf. Mk 16,15), and she has to commit the living forces of every particular Church in bringing the Good News to every sector of human life. The message must therefore be clear and precise: an explicit and prophetic proclamation of the risen Lord, delivered with apostolic "*parrhesia*" [freedom] (cf. Heb 5,28-29; *Redemptoris missio*, n. 45), so that the word of life becomes a personal commitment to Jesus, Saviour of mankind and of the world. "It is urgent to rediscover and to set forth once more the authentic reality of the Christian faith, which is not simply a set of propositions to be accepted with intellectual assent. Rather, faith is lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, and a truth to be lived out" (*Veritatis splendor*, n. 88).

3. The goal of your pastoral ministry must be to ensure that the truth about Christ and the truth about man penetrate more deeply every sector of Nicaraguan society and transform them, since "there is no true evangelization, if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 22). This is the only way to ensure an evangelization "in depth and going to their very roots" (*ibid.*, n. 20).

You carry out this difficult task among a people with noble hearts and a spirit that is open and receptive to the Good News of the Beatitudes. In Nicaragua, it is certain that the symptoms of a process of secularization are being felt in which for many people God is neither the origin or goal nor the ultimate meaning of life. Basically however, as you well know, this people has a profoundly Christian soul. Proof of this are the living and active ecclesial communities in which, despite the scarcity of priests, many people, families and groups, strive to live and bear witness to their faith. In this regard it is worth mentioning the tireless work of the Delegates of the Word and the catechists who have kept the people's faith alive. They need guidance and continuing theological and pastoral formation. This promising situation gives rise to the hope that new apostles will emerge and respond "with generosity and holiness to the calls and challenges of our time" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 92).

4. The new evangelization with methods and forms of expression takes the family as its primary objective. The *Final Statement* of the Santo Domingo Conference says that "the Church proclaims with joy and conviction the Good News about the family in which humanity's future is forged" (n. 210). The family is the "domestic church", especially when it is the fruit of living Christian communities, which produce young people who have a true vocation to the sacrament of marriage.

Families do not stand alone before the great challenges they must face; the ecclesial community supports them, encourages them in their faith and safeguards their perseverance in a Christian plan of life that is often subject to many upsets and dangers.

The Church helps the family to be an environment where the person is born, grows and is educated for life, and where the parents, with tender love for their children, prepare them for healthy personal relationships that will embody moral and human values in society, affected by hedonism and religious indifference.

At the same time, the ecclesial community, in collaboration with the public agencies of the Nation, should take care to preserve the stability of families and to encourage their spiritual and material progress in order to form their children to make their contribution to society. It is desirable that the authorities of your beloved country fulfil better and better their serious obligations to families. This is what I emphasized in my *Message for World Day of Peace* in 1994: "the family has the right to the full support of the State in order to carry out fully its particular mission" (n. 5) (*L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 22-29 Dec 1993, p. 2).

I cannot ignore the difficulties that the institution of the family has to face in Nicaragua, especially with regard to the tragedies of divorce and abortion, as well as the existence of unions that are not in keeping with the Creator's plan for marriage. The reality is a challenge that must stimulate the apostolic zeal of pastors and all who collaborate with them in this area.

5. Priestly vocations are one of your chief concerns, since the number of priests is insufficient to meet the needs of each diocese. As I pointed out at the opening of the Fourth General Conference of the Latin American Bishops, "an indispensable condition of the new evangelization is the ability to count on many and qualified evangelists. Therefore, the promotion of vocations to the priesthood and religious life ... must be a priority for the bishops and a commitment involving the whole People of God" (*Address at the inauguration of the Fourth General Conference of the Latin American Bishops [CELAM]*, n. 26, Santo Domingo, 12 October 1992).

I fervently implore the Lord of the harvest to grant that you will have in your seminaries, which must be the very heart of the diocese (*Optatam totius*, n. 5), more and more candidates for the priesthood who will one day be able to serve their brethren as "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (I Cor 4,1). As well as offering seminarians an integral formation, a careful evaluation of their human and Christian suitability is essential, to ensure, as far as possible, that they will carry out worthily their future ministry. Please convey my affectionate greetings to them. Tell them that the Pope expects a great deal of them and trusts in their generosity and fidelity to the call of the Lord.

The scarcity of people committed to the apostolate is making it necessary to reinforce more deeply the bonds of charity between the Bishop and his priests, since "the presbyterate thus appears as a

true family" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 74). Everything possible should be done to organize the presbyterate as a "sacramental brotherhood", (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 8), which reflects the life of the Apostles with Jesus, both in fulfilling the Gospel and their mission. If young people see that priests, around their bishop, are living a real spirituality of communion, witnessing among one another to union and love, evangelical generosity and missionary availability, they will feel more attracted to the priestly vocation. So it is extremely important that the bishop pay special attention to his chief collaborators, especially priests, that he always treat them fairly, be in touch with their personal and pastoral needs, act as a father to them in difficulties and constantly encourage them in their zeal and activities.

6. In your episcopal ministry, many of these pastoral challenges are closely connected with the evangelization of culture. It is important to foster a favourable cultural environment that facilitates the promotion of all the human and Gospel values in their full integrity. It is therefore also a matter of "affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 19).

The cultural context is one of the "modern areopagi" in which the full impact of the Gospel must be brought to bear (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, n. 37) and for this reason the media must not be overlooked. The radio, television productions, videos and computer networks can be of great help in spreading everywhere Gospel values.

With regard to your schools and the Catholic university, these institutions must maintain a clearly defined identity, because they largely ensure that the Gospel values imbue your nation's culture. It is also to be hoped that institutions of Christian inspiration truly promote the civilization of love, that they become factors of reconciliation and foster solidarity and development, obviously revealing the primacy of beauty, goodness and truth.

7. It is the distinctive task of lay people to "take on themselves this renewal of the temporal order. Guided by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church [and] prompted by Christian love" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 7). They must therefore be given an adequate religious formation that will equip them to face the many challenges of contemporary society. It is up to them to promote human and Christian values so that they will enlighten the country's political, economic and cultural reality in order to establish a more just and equitable social order, following the Church's social teaching. At the same time, consistent with ethical and moral norms, they must set an example of honesty and transparency in the conduct of their public activities to offset the corruption, an insidious and widespread blight, which takes hold of the sectors of political and financial power as well as other sectors of public and social life.

Lay people, individually or legitimately associated, must be the leaven in society, in public life

acting so as to bring the light of Gospel values to the secular realms in which a people's identity is forged. In their daily activities, it is up to them "to testify how the Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response - consciously perceived and stated by all in varying degrees - to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 34). Their condition as citizens of human society and followers of Christ must not cause them to lead "two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand, the so-called 'spiritual' life, with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called 'secular' life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture" (*ibid.*, n. 59). On the contrary, they must strive to make the coherence of their life and their faith an eloquent witness to the truth of the Christian message.

This is particularly important in view of the impending general elections in your country. As the pastors of your ecclesial communities you have therefore published the Exhortation "*Para la Libertad nos liberó Cristo Jesús*" (Gal 5,1) (Jesus Christ freed us for Liberty), in which you invite the entire people to exercise the right and duty to vote without absenteeism, thinking of the good of the nation. Likewise, you are certainly directing them to choose democratic options that will guarantee the "Christian conception of man and society", that "inescapably implies the fundamental rights of the person" in all their aspects (n. 8), as opposed to any kind of "visible or concealed totalitarianism" (n. 15). I certainly hope that the coming elections will be held in a climate of mutual respect, order and peace, and following the ethical principles of a healthy coexistence among citizens.

8. I would like to entrust you with these suggestions and desires to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, the title by which you honour your Mother and Patroness of the Nation, so that she may continue to guide your pastoral work. Relying on her intercession I assure you of my prayers, and I impart to you my heartfelt Apostolic Blessing which I extend to your particular Churches, to your priests, to your religious communities and consecrated persons, as well as to Nicaragua's Catholic faithful.