



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BRAZIL
FROM THE NORTHEAST REGION 5
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 19 October 2002

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate!

1. *"Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her" (Eph 5,25).*

I am pleased to recall this affirmation of the Letter to the Ephesians in receiving you today, Bishops of Maranhão, and welcome this occasion to share with you the richness of the pastoral ministry which was given to us by Christ. Meeting with you personally over the past few days, I was delighted with your apostolic zeal, that has as its source and model the gift of self of Christ to which St Paul refers in his Letter.

I embrace you with esteem, dear Brothers, and, particularly, I embrace those among you who have recently begun pastoral service. I thank you for the words addressed to me in your name by Bishop Affonso Felipe Gregory, Bishop of Imperatriz and President of the *Northeast Region 5*, referring to the current state of the Christian communities entrusted to you, whom I fondly remember from my second pastoral visit to your country.

2. The fundamental mission of the Bishop is evangelization, a work to be carried out not only individually, but also as a Church; it is a mission which unfolds in the threefold function of *teaching, sanctifying, and governing*.

As vicars and ambassadors of Christ, you are called primarily to offer a clear and vigorous proclamation of the Gospel, in a way that embraces the entire existence of the Christian. It is proclaimed with words, without which the apostolic value of good actions loses its lustre. It is

proclaimed with acts of charity, that are a living witness of the faith, remembering to include the spiritual works of mercy along with material works. Charitable actions cannot be separated from the Word of Christ out of a poorly interpreted sense of respect for the convictions of others. It is not charity to leave others in the dark with regard to the truth; it is not charity to feed the poor or visit the sick and offer them human resources without speaking to them the Word that saves.

"Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (Col 3,17).

3. As we know, Maranhão participated in the beginnings of Brazil's history of evangelization, during which, in the second half of the 17th century, its Church was a suffragan of the ecclesiastical province of Bahía. From the beginning, your State became the centre for the missionary action of great religious families - Jesuits, Capuchins, Mercedarians, etc. - many of which continue to offer their collaboration to the pastoral action of the greater part of your Dioceses. Thanks are due to Almighty God for the evangelizing work carried out there, which the Successor of Peter desires to promote with "grace ... and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 1,7).

The Gospel, preached with faithfulness by the Pastors as "teachers of the faith" and defenders of the Truth which sets us free, is something which will always be the common denominator for each of our encounters. The difficulties which you meet in carrying out your pastoral mission are not unknown to me: the lack of jobs and housing for many people (I think specifically of the problems connected with migration from rural areas to the city), and the problems related to basic education and health care in many sectors of society, which, together with the social inequalities and the aggressive presence of sects, are factors that give rise to uncertainty when you define your pastoral priorities.

While keeping in mind the complex social problems that exist in your regions, it is necessary not to reduce pastoral action to the temporal and earthly dimension. It is impossible to think, for example, of the challenges of the Church in Brazil as limited to certain important but contingent issues, related to local politics, land concentration, the environment and other factors. To apply to the Church a political model, where the decisions are voted upon by a "base" that is limited to the poor and the marginalized of society, excluding the presence of all sectors of the People of God, would alter the original redemptive message Christ proclaimed.

4. This same Son, sent by the Father, entrusted the Apostles with the mission of instructing "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 28,19-20). Christ's solemn mission to announce the salvific Truth of the faith was passed on from the Apostles to the Bishops, their successors, who are called to carry it to the farthest ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1,8), "for the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph 4,12) which is the Church.

The Bishops are called by the Holy Spirit to take the place of the Apostles, as Pastors of the Particular Churches. They are therefore clothed with a power which "is not diminished by the supreme and universal power. On the contrary, it is affirmed, strengthened, and vindicated thereby" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 27). Together with the Supreme Pontiff and under his authority, the Bishops have the mission of carrying out the work of Christ, the eternal Pastor. In fact, our Saviour gave to the Apostles and their successors the mandate and the power to teach all the nations, to *sanctify* men in the truth and to *govern* them (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 2). Before reflecting upon the threefold dimension of this pastoral mission, I want to emphasize above all the centre toward which all of your activities must converge: "The mystery of Christ as the basis of the Church's mission" (Encyclical Letter, *Redemptor hominis*, n. 11). He who, in some way, participates in the mission of the Church must grow in faithful adherence to the mandate received. This is especially true for Bishops who have been, so to speak, "inserted" into the mystery of Christ in a special way. Clothed in the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders, the Bishop is called to propose and to live the integral mystery of the Master (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 12) in the Dioceses entrusted to him. It is the mystery which contains "unsearchable riches" (Eph 3,8). Let us preserve this treasure!

5. In the threefold ministry of Bishops, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, *the preaching of the Gospel* has an eminent place. Pastors must principally be "preachers of the faith who lead new disciples to Christ" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 25). As one "rightly handling the word of truth" (II Tm 2,15), we must together transmit what we ourselves receive: not our poor words, however learned they may be, since we preach not ourselves but the revealed Truth, which must be transmitted with faithfulness in conformity with the teachings of the Church.

The ministry to *teach* presents its own difficulties due to the illiteracy of adults and children, although the results of the last census showed an encouraging increase in the average years of study among the poorest people.

On the other hand, fragile marriages, child violence, and malnutrition remain prevalent; connected with these are problems of housing, the lack of basic slum clearance in many places, and the evident, at times negative, influence of the means of social communication. These in particular, when directed toward today's widespread mentality which excludes from public life questions about the ultimate truths, confine religious faith and convictions about moral values to the private sphere. Society runs the risk that laws which exercise a strong influence on the thought and behaviour of men, leave aside the Christian moral foundation of society.

Dear Brothers, you know that it is the fundamental duty of the Bishop, as Pastor, to invite the members of the Particular Churches entrusted to him to accept the teaching of the Church in all of its fullness with regard to questions of faith and morals. We must not become discouraged if, at times, the preaching of the Word is only partially welcomed. With the help of Christ, who conquers the world (cf. Jn 16,33), the most effective remedy is to proceed "in season and out of season" (II Tm 4,2), in the steady yet courageous spreading of the Gospel.

May these commitments be made with the youth of your State especially in mind, who, in the capital for instance, make up half of the population. In carrying out your ecclesial ministry of teaching, in union with your priests and collaborators in catechesis, give particular attention to the *formation of the moral conscience*, which must be respected as the "sanctuary" of man alone with God, whose voice resounds in the intimacy of the heart (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 16). Remind your faithful with equal fervour, furthermore, that the conscience is an exacting tribunal whose judgement must always be conformed to the moral norms revealed by God and proposed with authority by the Church, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

A clear and unambiguous teaching on these themes can only positively influence the necessary return to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which unfortunately has been largely abandoned, even in the Catholic regions of your country.

6. With regard to the mission to *sanctify*, "the Bishop is to be considered the high priest of his flock. In a certain sense it is from him that the faithful who are under his care derive and maintain their life in Christ" (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, n. 41). For this reason he is, so to speak, the "first liturgist" of his Diocese and the principal dispenser of the Mysteries of God, organizing, promoting, and defending the liturgical life in the Particular Church entrusted to him (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 15).

To this end, I heartily recommend to you the two fundamental sacraments of the Christian life: *Baptism and the Eucharist*. After being elevated to the Chair of Peter, I approved the *Instruction on the Baptism of Children*, in which the Church confirmed the practice of infant baptism, in use since the beginning. In your local Churches the need to administer Baptism only when there is a realistic hope that the child will be educated in the Catholic faith is rightly insisted upon, so that the sacrament can bear fruit (cf. CIC can. 868, 2). At times, however, the norms of the Church are interpreted in a restrictive manner, neglecting the greater good of souls. It then happens, in certain circumstances, that parents are put off and ultimately refused the Baptism of their children. It is right that parents and godparents be fittingly prepared for the Baptism of their children, but it is also important that the first sacrament of Christian initiation is seen primarily as a *free gift of God the Father*, since "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3,5).

Given the duly justified need of preparing parents and godparents, pastoral prudence and goodness are needed. We cannot require from adults of good will who themselves have not been formed with an apposite understanding of the need for catechesis. When Baptism is requested, the opportunity should be taken to begin to offer catechesis to the parents, enabling them better to understand the Sacrament and so to give a Christian education to the new member of the family. In any case, one must never put out the existing flame, but rather one needs to create new modes of evangelization adapted to the world of today and to the needs of the people. The Bishop is primarily responsible that all priests, deacons, and pastoral workers should have the necessary

zeal, good will, and patience with less educated people.

Another fundamental task of our priestly ministry consists in reaffirming the vital role of the Eucharist as "source and culmination of the whole Christian life" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 11). The service of the Bishops and priests not only culminates in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice, but in it the life of all the other members of the Body of Christ finds its dynamic centre. A shortage of priests as well as the uneven distribution, and the worrying decrease in the number of those who regularly attend Sunday Mass, present a constant challenge for your Churches. It is evident that this situation suggests a temporary solution which risks a progressive spiritual impoverishment. The incomplete sacramental character of liturgical functions carried out by non-ordained persons (lay or religious), must therefore compel the entire parish community to pray with greater fervour that the Lord send laborers into His harvest (cf. Mt 9,38).

7. Finally, a word on the mission to *govern* which has been entrusted to you. In the exercise of this duty, you certainly keep before you the image of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be served but to serve (cf. Mt 20,28) In this regard, I especially recommend to you the priests of your local Churches, for whom, as Bishops, you constitute "the visible principle and foundation of unity" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23). Taking care of your priests is a very exacting service, especially when the fruits of pastoral work are slow in coming, and there is a possible temptation to give in to discouragement and sadness. Many Pastors have the impression that they work not in an evangelical vineyard but in an arid desert.

I know the weight of the daily tasks related to your ministry. Above all, with paternal solicitude, I remember the clear and feeling words of the Second Vatican Council: "Therefore, on account of this communion in the same priesthood and ministry, the bishop should regard priests as his brothers and friends. As far as in him lies, he should have at heart the material and especially spiritual welfare of his priests.... He should gladly listen to them, indeed, consult them, and have discussions with them about those matters which concern the necessities of pastoral work and the welfare of the diocese" (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 7). "With active mercy a bishop should attend upon priests who are in any sort of danger or who have failed in some respect" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 16).

8. In the face of the immensity of the mission which has been entrusted to you, dear Brothers, never be defeated by tiredness or discouragement, since the Risen Lord walks with you and makes your efforts fruitful. It is true that there are many pressing pastoral matters, but the human and spiritual resources upon which you can depend are likewise considerable. The work of leading this People of God to the fullness of faithful response to the Divine plan belongs to you.

May Mary accompany you in this difficult but joyful journey. To each one of you, as well as to the priests, the consecrated, and to all of the faithful of your Communities, I impart my heartfelt Blessing.

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