



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BRAZIL'S NORTHERN REGION
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 14 September 2002

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. With great pleasure, I receive you today, Pastors of the Church in Brazil, representing the North 1 and North East Regions of the National Bishops' Conference of Brazil. The *ad limina* visit gives you an opportunity to meet the Successor of Peter and his collaborators and to receive from them the necessary support for your pastoral action.

I warmly thank Archbishop *Luiz Soares Vieira* of Manaus for his cordial words on your behalf, renewing the expression of your affection and esteem and sharing with me the anxieties and hopes of the Church you guide in those regions. Through you I also greet the priests, the women and men religious and the faithful of your dioceses. Take back to them the affectionate remembrance of the Pope who keeps them in his prayers, so that they may grow in faith in Christ and in charity to their neighbour.

2. The distinctive feature of your mission as Pastors of the people entrusted to your care is first and foremost to be promoters and *models of communion*. Just as the Church is one, so there is only one Episcopate and, as the Second Vatican Council declares, the Pope is "the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23). For this reason the collegial union of the Episcopate is one of the constitutive elements of the unity of the Church.

This union among the bishops is particularly necessary in our day, since pastoral initiatives take many different forms and transcend the boundaries of an individual diocese. Communion must also become concrete in pastoral cooperation on combined programmes and common plans "in

questions of greater importance, especially those affecting the poor" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, n. 37). The Amazon region is certainly sensitive to developmental problems associated with the exploitation of the riches of its subsoil, and is also a known reserve of biodiversity. For this reason, there is a combination of factors linked with the human being and his *habitat* that demand due attention for the proper protection of a great many of the inhabitants, including those who live below the threshold of poverty.

On the other hand, the ecclesial communities need Pastors who are men of faith, united with one another, who can face the challenges of a society ever more inclined to secularization and consumerism. In fact, although a majority of the people have been baptized in the Catholic Church and practice various forms of popular piety, they are sometimes without a firm, enlightened faith. In this regard, the lack of an existential and ecclesial backbone for their faith and an indifference to the religious values and ethical principles are a powerful obstacle to evangelization. All this is further complicated by the presence of sects and of new groups of pseudo religions, which are even cropping up in traditionally Catholic areas. The phenomenon demands penetrating study "to discover the reasons why many Catholics leave the Church" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 73).

As teachers of sound doctrine who are called to point out the sure way that leads to the Father, and as servants of the light that is Christ, "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1,15), as successors of the Apostles, do not cease to offer in a consistent way the teaching of the ecclesial Magisterium.

3. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (I Cor 10,16-17). This affirmation of the Apostle of the Gentiles, which he addressed to the whole People of God, acquires greater prominence when it is used to refer to the *spirituality of communion* among Bishops who are called by their special mission to live their collegiality (cf. Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 44).

The Church is One as the Body of Christ is One. The unity of the Church is not only a "note" that must be recognized in the world, but it is "her very nature". In this way it is the beginning of her existence, her foundation and her goal, the original gift and mission to be lived and carried out. The faithful, "strengthened by the body of Christ in the Eucharistic communion ... manifest in a concrete way that unity of the People of God which this holy sacrament aptly signifies and admirably realizes" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 11). It is not only the local community of the faithful who gather before the altar, but the Catholic Church, complete in her entirety, who is present in every celebration of the sacrament of unity.

By more closely uniting people with Christ, the Eucharist makes them one body, the Mystical Body of Christ that is the Church, to the point that they can call the Eucharist the *sacrament of unity* (cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Supplementum*, q. 71, a. 9). Accepting the biblical-patristic teaching, my

Predecessor St Pius X vigorously asserted that "the Eucharist is the symbol, principle and root of Catholic unity, a factor of concord among spirits" (*Constitutio Apostolica de SS. Eucharistia promiscuo sumenda: AAS 1912, 675*). The Second Vatican Council also stressed, as we know, that the Eucharist is "a sign of unity, a bond of charity" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 47).

I wanted to remind you of these conclusions, which you certainly realize, thinking precisely of those immense regions with which you are familiar and which, through the action and grace of the Consoling Spirit, are entrusted to your pastoral zeal. You must not feel far from one another, despite the immense areas you often have to cross, not only to reach the most remote areas of the State, but also to maintain the necessary, indeed indispensable, contact in the exercise of your episcopal office. I would like to express here my deep appreciation of the great missionary efforts made by you and by numerous priests, men and women religious and lay people in these regions of Northern Brazil. May God reward you, with abundant fruits of joy and peace!

4. The Prophet Isaiah says: "*Non est abbreviata manus Domini*" (59,1), "the Lord's hand is not shortened". He is no less powerful today than he has been in past ages, and his love for human beings is just as genuine. Today too, his action is a reality that the faithful can recognize in the light of the signs of the times and seek to respond to with joy and gratitude.

Christ gave his Church the security of doctrine and ensured that there were people who with his light would direct, guide and constantly recall the way he set forth. We have an infinite treasury of wisdom at our disposal: the Word of God, safeguarded by the Church; the grace of Christ, entrusted to his Pastors, through the administration of the sacraments. How can we forget the witness and example of all those who live an upright life in our midst and have made their lives a way of fidelity to God?

This is the Church of Christ, venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, which has generated us and now accompanies us, forgiving our sins and animating us with new life, confident in the One who "has risen" from the dead (Mt 28,6).

To this Church we must show our love and veneration. It is the natural attitude of children to their own mother. In her Pastors we must find a powerful love, a dedication without limits, a self-sacrificing service; they must be able to give up any personal interest in order to live the same obedience with which Christ suffered on the Cross.

5. In addition to this dimension of affective ecclesial *communion (koinonia)*, it is good to remember the *effective dimension* since, as we know, there is one Church which exists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him.

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, once again our transcendent Eucharistic theology is a source of light for our fraternal meeting when we must show that the unity of the Church is equally

rooted in the unity of the Episcopate.

In approving the Letter addressed to the world Episcopate on this particular theme, I made my own the affirmation: "the unity of the Eucharist and the unity of the Episcopate *with Peter and under Peter* are not independent roots of the unity of the Church, since Christ instituted the Eucharist and the Episcopate as essentially interlinked realities. The Episcopate is *one*, just as the Eucharist is *one*: the one Sacrifice of the one Christ, dead and risen" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion*, n. 14). The Letter then concludes: "Every valid celebration of the Eucharist expresses this universal communion *with Peter* and with the whole Church" (*ibid.*).

With obvious objectivity, St Cyprian alerted us: "*We must make every effort to preserve and defend this unity, especially we bishops who have been placed at the head of the Church, in order to show that the Episcopate itself is one and indivisible*" (*De catholicae Ecclesiae unitate, [On the unity of the Catholic Church]*, 4-6). Therefore, your practice of coming to Rome, to go in the "obedience of faith" (Rom 1,5), *to see Peter* and in your ministry living *under Peter*, can only express that unity of spirit and action that will be converted into works that will build up more firmly the Kingdom of God in this world.

6. During my Pontificate the Lord has granted me, in the wake of my immediate Predecessors in the See of Peter, to assess more deeply those truths that have always been implicit in the ecclesial consciousness, such as the role of lay people in the Church, the sacramental origin of the bishops' power of jurisdiction, the need for the Christianization of temporal structures, for putting into practice the directives on human rights and the rights of the family, respect for life, the extraordinary importance of all sincere expressions of freedom, etc.

It might be said that this Apostolic See has published many documents and that, in view of the urgent need for pastoral activity, there is no time to give them as penetrating a consideration as might be hoped. As I have already had the opportunity to say, the Roman Pontiff carries out his universal mission with the help of the offices of the Roman Curia and in particular, in the area of the teaching on faith and morals, with the help of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (cf. Apostolic Constitution *Pastor bonus*, 28 June 1988, nn. 48-55). It is then the Bishops' mission to explain authoritatively, directly or by means of their priests and catechists, the non-transferable mission of teaching the Truth of the Gospel.

This is a good chance for me to recall the importance of giving priority to the promotion of vocations, through the proper formation of candidates to the priesthood (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, n. 40). At the same time, it is necessary to be dedicated to accompanying your priests in their ministerial function with an appropriate human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral *continuing formation*, as far as the possibilities of each diocese allow, or by means of regional or national initiatives.

Lastly, it is sometimes said that the Pope ignores either the local situations or the broader situation of the Latin American continent. Nevertheless, he tries to pay the greatest possible attention to what his brother Bishops tell him regularly during their *ad limina* visits. Furthermore, the many occasions on which, through God's grace, he has been able to visit Latin America and have direct contact with the peoples of that land so full of evangelical promise, witness once again to the confidence that the Successor of Peter has in your mission as Pastors. I therefore express the wish that the messages addressed to you may help guide the faithful on what is considered to be the Continent of Hope.

7. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, we are called to listen, as disciples, to what the Spirit says to the Churches (cf. Apoc 2,7), in order to speak as teachers in Christ's name declaring joyfully, as did St John Damascene: "And you, noble summit of the most total purity, illustrious assembly of the Church who expect the help of God, you in whom God dwells, receive from our hands the doctrine of the faith that strengthens the Church, just as our fathers transmitted it to us" (*Expositio fidei [Exposition of Faith]*, n. 1). I pray God that you may have success in this important pastoral mission so that the Church in Brazil, and especially in the Amazon region, may shine in her full glory as the Bride of Christ, whom he chose with infinite love. In entrusting your apostolic mission to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who in all ages is the radiant Star of Evangelization, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, to the priests, to the religious, and to the lay people of your dioceses.