



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPEAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES

Thursday, 8 May 2003

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

1. Welcome! I am grateful to you for your visit and address my cordial greeting to each one. In particular I greet Archbishop Amédée Grab, President of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences (CCEE), and I thank him for his words on your behalf. I greet Bishop Cesare Nosiglia, Delegate of the CCEE for catechesis, the other prelates, the General Secretary of the CCEE and all those present.

This meeting of Bishops and those responsible for catechesis in the various European countries provides an opportunity to reflect on the urgent needs and challenges of the new evangelization on the European continent. I thank all of you who are responsible for coordinating catechesis for your dedicated commitment to a task that is so vital for the growth of the Christian communities. In them, as in those of the apostolic times, believers must "*devote themselves to the apostles' teaching*" (Acts 2: 42).

2. The theme of the meeting - "*Priests and Catechesis in Europe*" - recalls the gift and the primary task of Bishops and priests: that is, the building up of the Church through the proclamation of the Word of God and catechetical teaching.

"*The priest*", I recalled in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, "is first of all a minister of the Word of God... sent forth to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom to all" (n. 26). Today, the boundaries of the priest's ministry are increasingly being extended to include pastoral contexts that enrich the Christian community but sometimes risk fragmenting his activity into thousands of commitments and activities.

His attention to catechesis suffers from this as it can be reduced to sporadic moments that have little effect on the formation of catechists. After the example of the Apostle Paul (cf. Rom 1: 14), he must instead feel, as it were, indebted to the entire people of God to preach the Gospel and to do so with the most careful theological and cultural preparation.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* notes: "*Experience bears out that the quality of catechesis in a community depends very largely on the presence and activity of the priest*" (n. 225).

3. As the first catechist in the community, the priest, especially if he is a parish priest, is called to be the first believer and disciple of the Word of God, and to devote painstaking care to the discernment and guidance of vocations to catechetical service. As a "*catechist of catechists*" he must be concerned with spiritual, doctrinal and cultural formation.

In a communitarian perspective, the priest will always be aware that the ministry of catechetics at the service of the people of God derives from his Bishop, to whom he is indissolubly bound by the sacrament of Orders and from whom he has received the mandate to preach and to teach.

The reference to the teaching office of the Bishop within the one diocesan presbyterate and the obedience to the guidelines for catechesis which every Pastor and Bishops' Conference issues for the good of the faithful, are elements that the priest must utilize in his catechetical action. In this perspective, it is particularly important to study and to apply the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, an indispensable *vademecum* (guide book) offered to priests, catechists and all the faithful, to direct catechesis on the paths of authentic fidelity to God and to the people of our time.

4. "*Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature*" (Mk 16: 15). This command of the Lord is addressed to every baptized person, but for Bishops and priests it "has pride of place" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 25). Like Christ the Good Shepherd, the priest is asked to assist the community because his life is one of continual missionary outreach. Catechesis in the family, in the working world, at school and at University, through the mass media and new languages, involves priests and lay people, parishes and movements. All are called to cooperate in the new evangelization, to keep alive and to revitalize their common Christian roots. The Christian faith is the richest patrimony from which the European peoples can draw to achieve their true spiritual, economic and social progress.

May Mary, Star of the new evangelization, ensure that the reflections and guidelines you have drawn up in these days serve to foster a renewed catechetical commitment in your Churches. For my part, I assure you of a remembrance in prayer as I wholeheartedly bless you all, along with the communities from which you come.

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