



The Holy See

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

Saturday, 22 November 2003

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. I am pleased to greet you all on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul. I greet in particular the youngest among you who are taking part in this meeting for the first time, and I thank Cardinal Godfried Danneels, President of your Bishops' Conference, for his kind words. I hope that this visit, which is an important time for contacts and exchanges with the Dicasteries of the Holy See and for a better service of evangelization but which is also a special moment for celebrating the *affectus collegialis* that unites us, will be for each one of you a significant landmark and encouragement in your difficult but exalting mission as Pastors of the People of God.

2. I find the information I received on the situation of your Church particularly disturbing. Indeed, one cannot conceal one's real and serious concern at the considerable and steady decrease in religious practice in your country, not only at Sunday celebrations but also at many sacraments, in particular Baptism, Reconciliation and, above all, Marriage. Likewise, the marked drop in the number of priests and the persistent vocations crisis are matters of grave concern for you. Yet you remarked on the quality of the pastoral collaboration among priests in your presbyteral councils, and with the representatives of the People of God in the diocesan pastoral councils. The increasingly active participation of the lay faithful in the Church's mission, especially in parishes, is also a cause of satisfaction. This participation must develop in accordance with the spirit of co-responsibility that the Second Vatican Council hoped for, and the pastoral guidelines contained in the interdicasterial Instruction *On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests*, which recalls the essential difference between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood and the irreplaceable character of the ordained ministry.

For this reason, in order to avoid possible confusion, the doctrinal principles concerning this topic must be clearly elaborated. This will give the faithful a clearer idea of the meaning of the ministerial priesthood for the service of the People of God. Young people will obviously not be able to commit themselves to the ministry if they are unable to recognize their place in the Christian community or if the faithful question the value of their commitment. In this area, therefore, it is your duty to teach all the members of your Dioceses the meaning and value of the ordained ministry.

3. Of course, the rapid changes you are noting correspond to a tangibly evolving society, marked by widespread secularization. This might at times give the impression that Belgian society is complacently turning its back on its Christian roots which, however, give depth to its life. Thus, your Country has recently acquired new and worrying legislation in areas that affect the fundamental dimensions of human and social life: birth, marriage and the family, sickness and death. You have not failed to intervene on these issues. It is important that Pastors always make their voice heard to reaffirm the Christian vision of life and, on this occasion, to show their disapproval, because these legal changes are not only a sign of adaptation or evolution in the face of new mindsets or conduct, but deeply affect the ethical dimension of human life and call into question natural law, the way human rights are conceived and, going even deeper, the way the human being and human nature are conceived.

4. So it is that you are living your mission as Pastors of Christ's Church on new pastoral ground, shifting and difficult. As I wrote very recently to the Bishops of the whole world: "If the duty of proclaiming the Gospel is incumbent upon the whole Church and each of her children, it is particularly so upon Bishops, who on the day of their sacred ordination, which places them in apostolic succession, assume as one of their principal responsibilities the proclamation of the Gospel; "with the courage imparted by the Spirit, they are to call people to faith and strengthen them in living faith"' (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, n. 26). As Bishops, we are therefore responsible for making people hear, loudly and clearly, the proclamation of God's salvation that is offered to every human being in the mystery of Christ's redemptive love, salvation brought about once and for all on the tree of the Cross. It is also our responsibility to invite the faithful to lead a life in conformity with the faith they profess. In a society that is losing its traditional reference points and willingly fosters a generalized relativism in the name of pluralism, our first duty is to communicate Christ, his Gospel of peace and the new light it sheds on the future of man. By acting in this way, "the Church is not motivated by an earthly ambition but is interested in one thing only: to carry on the work of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for he came into the world to bear witness to the truth, to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 3). I therefore ask you to engage in active dialogue with civil society and with all the people of Belgium, taking pains to make known explicitly the values of the Christian faith and its rich human experience through history and cultures, not to impose it as a model but out of respect for the truth whose ministers you are in Christ's name, and out of respect for the dialogue itself, which demands that each person's legitimate identity be taken into account. On these conditions the Church will find her proper place in Belgian society, proclaiming the Gospel clearly

and working towards its gradual inculturation in the culture of our time.

5. To enable the faithful to enter into this truly missionary perspective, I encourage you to concentrate on developing the theological, spiritual and moral formation of as many of them as possible so that the lay faithful will feel upheld in their lives as Christians. It will also prepare them better to account for the hope that is in them (I Pt 3: 15), through deeper knowledge of the Word of God and of the mystery of the faith, aided by a systematic and consistent explanation of its content based mainly on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. You should also take care to support the universities and institutes that offer a very high level of education, more specialized but indispensable, so that they will persevere in witnessing consistently to the vigour of Christian thought. By so doing they will render an important service, especially to priestly formation!

Effectively support institutional relations also by means of the esteem and trust that bind you to these establishments as well as to the people who work in them and to theologians in particular, so that Catholic unity may always be expressed with the necessary respect for the competencies and responsibilities of each one (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, n. 29)! Indeed, the Catholic university "must exercise its mission by being careful to maintain its Christian identity.... While preserving its own scientific autonomy, it has the mission of living the teaching of the Magisterium in the various areas of research in which it is involved" (*Address to International Congress on Globalization and Catholic Universities, Organized by the Congregation for Catholic Education and the International Federation of Catholic Universities*, n. 6, 5 December 2002; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [*ORE*], 11 December 2002, p. 4). It is up to the university authorities and Pastors, whom you are, to see that this is done. I ask you also, jointly with the parish priests and through the continuing formation services, to distribute the Bible to families so that "listening to the Word of God [may] become a life-giving encounter in the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs and shapes our lives" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 39). I hope that especially the faithful will delve more and more deeply into the importance of the Eucharist in their personal and community lives. May they also make time for prayer in their daily lives, to draw from the true source in accordance with an essential principle of the Christian view of life: the primacy of grace (cf. *ibid.*, n. 38)!

6. A special effort is needed to constantly improve the moral, theological and spiritual formation of the priests who will be responsible for leading the Christian communities of tomorrow, to ensure the quality of their witness in the society in which they live, as well as the visible unity of the presbyterate around the Bishops. In this regard, a purely superficial formation will not suffice; to become a Pastor after Christ's heart demands the person's true conversion. He reaches it through all the dimensions of priestly formation, in the crucible of community life as well as in the deepening of spiritual life. It is particularly to be hoped that young people, and more generally all Christians, will have a correct knowledge regarding the objective requirements of the call to the priestly ministry, especially with regard to celibacy for sacred orders which, in accordance with the tradition that comes to us from the Lord, are reserved for men. What I said to the whole Church at

the beginning of the new millennium, "*Duc in altum*, put out into the deep!" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 1), I repeat to your communities in particular: put out into the deep, draw from the depths, restore to Christian life its full spiritual content! The expected renewal of Christian life and of vocations to the ordained ministry as well as to the consecrated life, cannot come about merely from external reforms or reorganization, however useful these may be. First and foremost, it must come from an inner renewal of the faith life of both Pastors and faithful. It is also important to rediscover the sacramental dimension of the Church and the truth about her mystery as the mystical Bride of the Son of God (cf. Eph 5: 31-32), who is the Redeemer of man. It is also at this level that the ordained ministry finds its true meaning: it is not merely a question of being the community animator or coordinator of the many varied activities of the ministry, but far more, of sacramentally representing, in the community and for the community, Christ the Servant, the Head of the Church which is his Body.

How could the Church lack this gift of the Lord to his Church? I urge you, dear Brothers, with all your strength as Pastors to support and encourage a vocations apostolate that challenges communities and young people so that they will all undertake to transmit God's call and prepare the future of your Dioceses.

7. The Church in Belgium has always paid attention to the education of youth, mobilizing many of her vital forces for this purpose, especially men and women Religious and the Catholic schools that are very numerous in your country and now have a large number of students. I congratulate you in this regard for clearly reasserting the principles of Catholic teaching and your attachment to its identity. I ask those in charge, the teachers and the pupil's parents, to reflect more deeply on the wealth of this Catholic identity in order to give the young generations the best of the Church's educational tradition, a sense of God and a sense of man, as well as the indispensable moral principles that will enable them to advance serenely and responsibly on the highroads of life. Then those young Belgians who choose to live the Gospel through involvement in temporal realities and in the sacrament of Marriage will be able to stand up with those who choose to follow Christ more radically on the path of the evangelical counsels, thereby adding new fruit to the already abundant harvest of consecrated life in Belgium.

It is from among the young people, generously open to Christ and the universality of his love, that vocations to the diocesan priesthood and missionary priests for the world can spring up.

8. Whereas in your reports you stressed the problems of Christian life in a seemingly anaemic society, you also noted the signs of a possible renewal: the new dynamism of pilgrimages, the attraction for the silence of the monastery, the tangible increase in the number of adult catechumens, the active participation of many lay people in the life of parish communities and the widespread new taste for an authentic spiritual life. With the Psalmist we could say: "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him" (Ps 126[125]: 5-6). The

believer's hope, expressed in these words on the return from the Babylonian Exile, illuminates the life of the lay faithful. The important discussions that interest Belgian society today actually ask of them a twofold witness: that of the prophetic word, by taking an unambiguous stand that corresponds with the demands of the Gospel, as the Magisterium of the Church reminds them on many occasions in season and out of season (II Tim 4: 2), and that of actions, the witness of committed men and women amid the joys and difficulties of daily life, in life as a couple and as a family, in work and social or political responsibilities, attentive to their brethren and showing solidarity in their joys and hopes (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1), eager to witness to them Christ's love without reserve. Have at heart to encourage and support all who work to promote a programme for the pastoral care of the family that testifies to the greatness of Christian marriage and the happiness of welcoming children, which can also help those whose own life project has been damaged to find their place in the ecclesial community!

The faith of the Psalmist also illumines the daily toil of priests, generously devoted to their pastoral mission but who might feel weary or depressed at times by the difficulties they encounter. May they know how very close the Pope is to them, giving thanks for the fruitfulness of their ministry, often hidden, and praying that they may be ever more attached to Christ, their Teacher and their Lord! My gratitude, however, is also due to the permanent deacons: in communion with the Bishops and in collaboration with the priests, through the gift of their life they proclaim Christ's faithful and humble love. It is in the Holy Spirit who dwells within us and gives us on earth the hope of unending joy (cf. *Roman Missal, Preface for Sundays*, n. VI), which is drawn from the source of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, that you yourselves, Bishops of Belgium, receive new strength each day to encourage, support, enlighten and guide those whom the Lord has entrusted to your care in his Church. Be prophets for them, witnesses and servants of hope, for "especially in times of growing unbelief and indifference, hope is a stalwart support for faith and an effective incentive for love. It draws its strength from the certainty of God's desire for the salvation of all people (cf. I Tim 2: 4), and for the constant presence of the Lord Jesus, the *Emmanuel* who remains with us always, until the end of the world (cf. Mt 28: 20)" (*Pastores Gregis*, n. 3).

May the Virgin Mary, who in her womb bore the Hope of all men, watch lovingly over the needs of the Church in Belgium; may she turn towards her Son, as she did at the wedding in Cana, the hearts of all the faithful: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2: 5)!

To you all, I impart an affectionate Apostolic Blessing, which I willingly extend to the priests and deacons, to the men and women Religious, and to all the lay faithful of your Dioceses.