



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE FIRST GROUP OF FRENCH BISHOPS  
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

*Friday, 28 November 2003*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. I am pleased to welcome you, Bishops of the Provinces of Cambrai and Rheims. Your visit is the first of the series of meetings I shall be having with the Pastors of the Church in France. I am delighted, therefore, that I will have the opportunity in the weeks to come to talk to all the Bishops of your Episcopal Conference. I remember with emotion my Visit to your region and the World Youth Day that you have just mentioned. It mobilized young people on a wide scale and, as you say and as your reports and your regular diocesan bulletins emphasize, it has given a new impetus to the young Catholics of your Country. I would like to address a special greeting to the three recently-appointed Bishops. I thank Archbishop Thierry Jordan of Rheims, your spokesman, for his words expressing your *affectio collegialis*, your apostolic zeal and your hope, and for the good wishes he conveyed to me on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of my Pontificate. I am particularly aware of the context in which you are making your *ad limina* visit, an important time in a Bishop's spiritual life and mission and a beautiful experience of communion between Pastors.

2. In today's world, as your quinquennial reports show, your mission has certainly become more complex and delicate, mainly because of the crisis situation facing you, strongly marked by spiritual and pastoral frailty. Christian values and even the image of the Church are not seen positively by a society where a process of subjective and lax morality often prevails. Likewise, you are worried about the dwindling number of clergy and consecrated persons. However, whatever your apostolic circumstances, in order that Christ's hope may not cease to dwell within you and guide your ministry, I encourage you, as I recalled in *Pastores Gregis*, taking up the Bishops' recommendation at their Synodal Assembly, to pay attention *to your own spiritual life*, basing your ministry on a strong relationship with Christ, longer meditation on Scripture and an intense

sacramental life. This will enable you to communicate to the faithful the desire to live in intimate union with God, so that they may strengthen their faith and together with you present the faith to your fellow citizens in the spirit of the documents you have drafted on Gospel proclamation. Indeed, every mission relies on the privileged relationship with the Saviour since, as the Apostle says, it is God who gives the growth (cf. I Cor 3: 6). Since the early days of the Church, Apostles have been aware of the danger certain queries might pose for their ministry. They also remember that it is important to "devote [themselves] to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6: 4), watchful and steadfast in faith, ready to confront any challenges that arise in proclaiming the truth and in interpersonal exchanges (cf. St Gregory the Great, *Homily on Ezekiel*, I, 11, 4-6). What is fundamental to all Christian life, as I recalled in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (cf. n. 39), and especially to the apostolic mission, is the relationship with Christ and familiarity with the Word, especially in *lectio divina*, which allows us to assimilate the Word of God and to shape our lives.

3. In the life and mission of Bishops, *fraternal collaboration* and concern for communion are essential, if they are to express the unity of the whole ecclesial Body. In fact, as the Apostle Paul says, living in the truth of love, "we are to grow up in every way into Christ who is the head from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love" (Eph 4: 15-16).

Consequently, an ever greater coherence between the members of the Apostolic College will be reflected in the whole Body of the Church. I know of your concern to carry out your episcopal ministry as well as possible, faithful to its nature, caring for the flock and faithful to the nature of the mystery of the Church. In this regard, I would first like to recall with you, as we celebrate this year the 50th anniversary of the major work of Cardinal Henri de Lubac, *Méditation sur l'Église*, the mystery of the Church, the Body of Christ in which you, as successors of the Apostles, are responsible for governing, teaching and sanctifying the Christian people, as I wrote in the recent Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis* (cf., n. 5). It appears more important than ever today to help the faithful discover the meaning and *the greatness of the mystery of Christ's Church*, broadly developed in the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, which would require further study. This mystery refers to the mystery of the Eucharist, for "the Eucharist builds the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist" (cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 26). The Church is convened and assembled by Christ who communicates his life to her and gives her the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, the memorial of the sacrifice of the Cross, Christians receive the Saviour, truly present, to be conformed to their Lord and through him, to live in fraternal communion, united to their Pastors who represent Christ the Head and Shepherd of the flock.

Without a serious and profound knowledge of the mystery of the Church, which always refers to Christ, it is obviously impossible to grasp the meaning of the ordained ministries, and more generally, of the structure of the Church; thanks to these ministries, the Church, in the footsteps of

the Apostles, can proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth (cf. Mk 16: 15). I therefore encourage you, with all the people qualified in this area, to use a suitable catechesis when instructing the people of God in the divine nature of the Church - which is an intrinsic part of the Christian mystery, as we proclaim it in the *Creed*: "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church" - and in the meaning of episcopal ministry. This will contribute to greater unity between the various diocesan communities.

Nourished by this contemplation of the mystery of the Church, the faithful will be strengthened in their love for Christ and for his mystical Body. They will understand what they must be in order to participate more fully in *the new evangelization*. In fact, an evangelizer must wish to build the Church in accordance with the Lord's will and the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and must want to be a child of the Church in which, as St Thérèse of Lisieux said with enthusiasm, each one is called to discover his vocation, for the glory of God and for the world's salvation. This also implies that each person be conscious that he is, in his own way, personally, in the family and in the community, an image of the Church in the eyes of the world. Therefore, deeply rooted in Christ, the faithful will be committed throughout their life to witness to the Good News of salvation, ready to look for the lost sheep. They will be messengers and artisans of unity, to build a reconciled world (cf. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, nn. 14-15; 29, 31).

4. In order to show your close episcopal collegiality, to make your pastoral work more effective and to increase your exchanges, you have courageously undertaken after some thought to make certain changes. They include the reordering of ecclesiastical provinces, thereby returning to the ancient form of interdiocesan relations. These have fostered intense cooperation between the Bishops down the ages, particularly concerning doctrinal and pastoral programmes as shown by the Provincial Councils and Synods. It is sufficient to recall the Provincial Councils of the fourth century and the figure of St Caesarius of Arles, whose importance in theological teaching is well known.

Such a reference to history will awaken in Pastors and in the communities the desire to make the Church of Christ alive today through *a renewed commitment*. On your part, the decreasing number of priests and active members will certainly mean, without affecting the responsibility proper to each Bishop, that Dioceses of a single province can join together and establish common services, especially in catechesis, continuing formation of the clergy and laity, as well as everything that regards vocations. In this way they will avoid dispersion and inspire new dynamism. The smaller size of the new ecclesiastical provinces compared with the former apostolic regions will henceforth afford you a particularly appropriate opportunity for more intense collegial work in a comparatively unified pastoral framework. I earnestly hope that this will strengthen the bonds of your fraternal communion, and help and support you in your personal life and mission.

Bishops are constantly required to bear a *witness of apostolic communion*, with one another and with the whole of the Episcopal College around the Successor of Peter. They must work in great

mutual confidence and take pains to do nothing that might break this communion or give a possible negative image to the faithful, and more generally to the world, notwithstanding respect for the proper, immediate power of each Bishop on diocesan territory and the supreme power of the Roman Pontiff (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, n. 56). In his action, speech and decisions, each Bishop in some way involves the whole episcopal body and the whole Church; the unity of the Church is rooted in the unity of the episcopacy. The diocesan Church, around her Pastor, is the image of the Church, one and united, for all the "particular Churches "are constituted after the model of the universal Church" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 833; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 23). In the same way, the Church of Christ is present in each ecclesial community united with its Pastor, however small it may be, and in it finds her origins and the source of her apostolate. However, it is right to stress there is no contradiction between legitimate diversity, which enables each diocesan Church to have her own features determined by her Pastors and communities. It would be prejudicial if the exercise of communion were to become a hindrance to the dynamism of the different local communities; in a certain way, this would contradict the very meaning of communion (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 18). As the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* stresses: "In virtue of this catholicity each part contributes its own gifts to other parts and to the whole Church, so that the whole and each of the parts are strengthened by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to attain to fullness in unity.... Holding a rightful place in the communion of the Church there are also particular Churches that retain their own traditions without prejudice to the Chair of Peter, which presides over the whole assembly of charity and protects their legitimate variety, while at the same time taking care that these differences do not hinder unity, but rather contribute to it" (n. 13). This gives rise to bonds of intimate communion.

5. A Bishop's apostolic mission consists *primarily in preaching the Gospel*, which makes us say like St Paul, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (I Cor 9: 16), communicating to the world the truth of which the Church is a vehicle. This goes hand in hand with the mission of guiding and sanctifying the People of God, after the example of the Good Shepherd, and so of building the portion of the Church entrusted to each Bishop, an image of the one Body of Christ. It is the Bishop's task to take special care of his local Church and to govern it well with the assistance of his collaborators, whom he himself has chosen. The smaller and weaker the people, the fewer priests there will be, and the more indispensable it is that the Bishop lead the flock entrusted to his care, careful not to leave it for too long, to visit the various communities, to listen to them and encourage them. In order to stress this mission and put all active members in mission, your Conference is currently reviewing its institutions. I praise this unanimous decision which shows the Bishops' awareness that the changes in society and in the Church demand new forms of collaboration and new functions, so that the structures may be truly at their service and at the service of all the aspects of mission. The routine renewal of the structure, although it may at times be painful to certain people, is necessary in order to prevent forms of sclerosis that might dampen pastoral dynamism and ecclesial research. In this regard, I greet the priests and lay people who humbly agree to collaborate in the life of the Church in the national proceedings of the

Conference and who, by their devotion, witness to their concern to serve Christ.

6. I have chosen to focus *my first talk on the Church* and on the episcopal mission, with reference to the recent Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Gregis*. During the visits from the different French Ecclesiastical Provinces, I will have the opportunity to broach other subjects mentioned in the quinquennial reports that the Bishops of your Conference have sent to me. At the end of our meeting, I ask you to express my fraternal greetings and confident encouragement to the priests and deacons. As you have stressed, they carry out their mission faithfully and generously, and feel responsible for proclaiming the Gospel and for building up the Church. Please convey to all your diocesans, especially the individual persons and families who have had problems connected with the financial situation of your region, my affectionate thoughts, and assure them of my fervent prayers. As I entrust you to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Patroness of your Country, Mother of the Church and "Mirror of the Church", as Fr de Lubac liked to call her, I wholeheartedly impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the members of your Dioceses.