



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO SPANISH BISHOPS ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT

Monday, 24 January 2005

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I receive you with joy, Pastors of the pilgrim Church of God in Spain. You are the first group to come to Rome on your *ad limina* visit and to strengthen the close bonds that unite you with this Apostolic See.

I greet with affection the Cardinal Archbishop of Madrid, President of the Spanish Bishops' Conference, with his three Auxiliaries; the Archbishop of Toledo, Primate of Spain, with his two Auxiliaries; the Archbishop who is Military Ordinary and the Archbishops of Burgos, Oviedo, Valladolid, Zaragoza, Mérida-Badajoz, as well as the suffragan Bishops of these metropolitan sees and of the See of Pamplona, to whose Archbishop I wish a speedy recovery. Through you, I would like to greet with affection and esteem the priests, men and women religious and faithful of your particular Churches.

I cordially thank Cardinal Antonio María Rouco Varela for his kind words on behalf of you all, presenting to me the worries and the hopes of your pastoral activity in which you courageously exercise your ministry, guiding the People of God on the path of salvation and vigorously proclaiming the principles of the Catholic faith for a better formation of the faithful.

2. Spain is a Country with deep Christian roots. Believing in Christ and belonging to the Church has been part of Spanish life and history and has inspired the achievements of the Spanish down the centuries. The Church in your Nation has left a shining trail of generosity and sacrifice, of strong spirituality and altruism, and has bestowed upon the universal Church many sons and daughters who were often distinguished by their practice of the virtues to a heroic degree or by their witness to martyrdom. I myself have had the joy of canonizing and beatifying many sons and

daughters of Spain.

In my Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, I suggested to the faithful the study, updating and presentation of the "heritage of sanctity" (n. 37). I am convinced that at this time in history it will be a precious and effective help for Pastors and the faithful as a reference point in their Christian life, especially since many of the challenges and problems that still exist in your Nation already existed in other periods, and it was the saints who gave a brilliant response to them with their love for God and neighbour. Spain's deep Christian roots, as I pointed out during my last Pastoral Visit in May 2003, cannot be torn out; indeed, they must continue to nourish the harmonious growth of society.

3. Your quinquennial reports demonstrate the concern for the vitality of the Church and the challenges and difficulties to be confronted. In recent years, in Aragón, Asturias, Cantabria, Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla y León, Extremadura, Madrid, Navarra and the Basque Country, the regions where you exercise pastoral charity in your guidance of the People of God, much has changed in the social, economic and even religious spheres. At times these changes have led to religious indifference and to a certain moral relativism that influences Christian worship and consequently conditions social structures themselves.

Certain areas have an abundance of resources, whereas others are suffering from serious deprivation. Sometimes, what in previous periods were a source of wealth - for example, mining and the iron and steel industry, shipbuilding and various kinds of business - are now going through a certain crisis in which it is necessary to keep hope alive. In some areas there has been a civil confrontation over a natural resource: water. Since water is a common property it must not be wasted, nor must people forget that it is their duty, out of solidarity, to share it. Wealth cannot be monopolized by those who possess it, nor can desperation or dissatisfaction justify certain uncontrolled actions on the part of those who do not.

4. A mindset inspired by a secular outlook is spreading in society. This ideology leads gradually, more or less consciously, to the restriction of religious freedom to the point that it advocates contempt for, or ignorance of, the religious environment, relegating faith to the private sphere and opposing its public expression. All this is alien to the most noble Spanish tradition, since the impression left by the Catholic faith in the lives and culture of the Spanish People is too deep for them to yield to the temptation to cancel it. A correct concept of religious freedom is incompatible with this ideology that is sometimes presented as the only rational voice. Religious freedom cannot be curtailed without depriving human beings of something fundamental.

In the contemporary social context, new generations of Spaniards are growing up influenced by religious indifferentism and by ignorance of the Christian tradition with its rich spiritual heritage. Moreover, they are exposed to the temptation of moral permissiveness. Young people are entitled to instruction in the faith from the very beginning of their schooling; nor can the integral education of younger children fail to include the teaching of religion at school, when parents request it, with

an academic appreciation that does credit to its importance. The public Authorities, for their part, are duty bound to guarantee this parental right. And they must assure the real conditions for it to be effectively exercised, as set down in the Partial Agreements between Spain and the Holy See in 1979 and currently in force.

5. With regard to the religious situation, your reports reflect a serious concern for the vitality of the Church in Spain, while they emphasize at the same time various challenges and problems. Attentive to the difficulties and expectations of the faithful as they face this new situation, you feel called as Pastors to remain united in order to make the Lord's presence among men and women more tangible through pastoral projects better suited to the new situations.

To succeed in this, it is essential to preserve and increase the gift of unity that Jesus requested of the Father for his disciples (cf. Jn 17: 11). In your own Dioceses, you are required to live and bear witness to the unity that Christ desired for his Church. Moreover, far from threatening this unity, the diversity of peoples with their different cultures and traditions must enrich it, starting with their common faith. It is up to you, as successors of the Apostles, to strive to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4: 3). I would like to remind you, therefore, that "in the historical transition that we are experiencing, you have a difficult mission before you: to make the Church the place where we live and the school where the mystery of God's love is taught. How will this be possible without rediscovering an authentic spirituality of communion?" (*Message to 25th Conference of Bishops-Friends of the Focolare Movement*, 14 February 2001, n. 3; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 4 April 2001, p. 7), valid for all people at every moment.

6. Since the sacraments are vital for the growth of Christian life, Pastors must celebrate them with dignity and decorum. Special importance must be given to the Eucharist, the "Sacrament of devotion, a sign of unity, a bond of charity" (St Augustine, *Evangelium Iohannis Tractatus*, 26, 13). Participation in it, as the Holy Fathers recall, makes us "members of Christ's body and gives us kinship with Christ" (St Cyril of Alexandria, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, IV, 3), and spurs Christians to engage in spreading the Gospel and in increasing awareness of Christianity in society. In this regard, on the occasion of the close of the Jubilee Year of Santiago de Compostela, I asked the Spanish faithful to find in the Blessed Sacrament the strength to overcome the obstacles and face the difficulties of our day. At the same time, if they are sustained by their Bishops, they will feel stronger in their faith in order to bear a public and credible witness to defending "effective respect for life in all its stages, the religious education of children, the protection of marriage and the family and the defence of the Name of God and of the human and social value of Christianity" (*Letter to the Archbishop of Santiago de Compostela*, 8 December 2004). There should then be an increase in pastoral activities that encourage the faithful to participate more regularly in Sunday Mass. Holy Mass must be experienced not as an obligation but rather as a requirement that is deeply rooted in every Christian's life.

7. In your quinquennial reports you expressed concern for your priests and seminarians. Priests

are on the front line of evangelization and bear "the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Mt 20: 12). They especially need your pastoral care and closeness, since they are your "sons" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 28), your "friends" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 16) and your "brothers" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 7).

Your relations with priests must not be merely of an institutional and administrative kind but must first and foremost be inspired by love (cf. I Pt 4: 8). Indeed, in your relations with them you should show your episcopal fatherhood, which will set an example to priests that they in turn can hold up to the faithful in their care. In the current situation you must express this fatherhood especially to sick and elderly priests, and with those who face the greatest number of pastoral responsibilities.

Priests, for their part, must remember that before anything else, they are men of God and cannot therefore neglect their spiritual life and their continuing formation. All their ministerial work "*must effectively begin with prayer*" (St Albert the Great, *Commentary on Mystical Theology*, 15). Among the many activities that fill every priest's day, they should give priority to the celebration of the Eucharist, which conforms them to the Eternal High Priest. Priests find in God's presence the strength to live the demands of the ministry and the docility to the will of the One who called and consecrated them, sending them forth to carry out a special and necessary mission. The devout celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, private prayer, assiduous meditation on the Word of God, devotion to the Mother of the Lord and to the Church and the veneration of the Saints are as many valuable instruments that priests cannot afford to ignore if they are to assert the splendour of their own identity and ensure that they exercise a useful priestly ministry.

8. The increase in vocations to the priesthood that is recorded in some places keeps hope alive. It is true that the social and religious situations do not encourage listening to the Lord's call to follow him in the priestly or consecrated life. It is therefore important to pray ceaselessly to the Lord of the harvest (cf. Mt 9: 38) so that he will continue to bless Spain with many holy vocations. To this end, you must encourage a specific vocations apostolate, broad and far-reaching, which prompts those in charge of youth to be daring mediators of the Lord's call. You should not be afraid of proposing it to young people and then, of giving them continuous human and spiritual guidance so that they will make progress in the discernment of their vocational decision.

9. It is incumbent upon Catholic faithful to seek the Kingdom of God in dealing with temporal realities and in ordering them in accordance with the divine will. They are called to be courageous witnesses of their faith in the various public arenas. Their participation in Church life is fundamental, and there are times when without their collaboration your apostolate as Pastors would not reach all persons "of every epoch and all over the earth" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 33).

Young people, the future of the Church and of society, must be the special object of your pastoral care. Here you must spare no efforts that are necessary, even if they are not always immediately fruitful. In this regard, how is it possible not to remember the impressive and moving prayer vigil at

which I presided with hundreds of thousands of young people at Cuatro Vientos, reminding them that it is possible to be both modern and Christian? Many of them are now getting ready to go to Cologne to take part in World Youth Day. Tell them that the Pope expects them there, under the theme of "We have come to worship him" (Mt 2: 2), so that, together with their peers from other countries, they may discover in Christ the face of God and of the Church as "the home and the school of communion" and love (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 43).

10. Dear Brothers, you have taken the initiative of dedicating a special year to the Immaculate Virgin, Patroness of Spain, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of the Marian Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. This is an invitation to the faithful to renew their consecration to our Mother, personally and as a community, and to accept my invitation to the whole Church to "listen to Mary Most Holy, in whom the mystery of the Eucharist appears, more than in anyone else, as a *mystery of light*" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 62).

In Spain, evangelization and religious practice have always gone hand in hand with special love for the Virgin Mary. This is demonstrated by the many churches, shrines and monuments that dot the whole of your countryside; and by the confraternities, congregations, university corporations and councils that persist in defending her privileges as well as the practices of popular piety and celebrations in honour of the Mother of God. Moreover, she has also been a source of inspiration to many artists, celebrated painters and famous sculptors.

Spain is Mary's Land. To her I commend your pastoral intentions. I place all priests, men and women religious, seminarians, children, young people and the elderly, families, the sick and the needy under her protection. Take back to them all the greeting and affection of the Pope, together with the Apostolic Blessing.

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