



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO THE BISHOPS OF THE POLISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Saturday, 3 December 2005

Dear Brothers in the Episcopal Ministry,

I offer my cordial greeting to you all. I am pleased to be able to offer hospitality to the second group of Polish Bishops who have come here on their visit *ad limina Apostolorum*.

The new evangelization

During his first Pilgrimage to Poland, John Paul II said: "From the Cross of Nowa Huta began the new evangelization, *the evangelization of the second millennium*. This Church is a witness and confirmation of it. It arose from a living, aware faith and [the Church] must continue to serve the faith. The evangelization of the new millennium must refer to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. It must be, as that Council taught, *a work shared* by Bishops, priests, Religious and laity, by parents and young people" (cf. *Homily, Nowa Huta*, n. 3, 9 June 1979; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 16 July, p. 11).

At the time, it was one of the first, if not *the* first, Interventions of my great Predecessor on the theme of the new evangelization. He spoke of the second millennium, but there is no doubt that he was already thinking of the third.

Under his guidance, we entered this new millennium of Christianity, becoming aware of the constant timeliness of his exhortation to a new evangelization. With these brief words he set the aim: to revive a "living, aware and responsible" faith. He subsequently said that this must be the common work of Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay people.

Today, I would like to reflect on this topic with you, dear Brothers. We know well that the chief person responsible for the work of evangelization is the Bishop, on whose shoulders rest the *tria*

munera: prophetic, priestly and pastoral.

In his book, *Rise, Let Us Be on Our Way!*, and especially in the chapters: "The Shepherd", "I Know My Sheep" and "The Administration of Sacraments", John Paul II mapped the journey of the episcopal ministry with reference to his own experience so that it might bear blessed fruit.

We need not mention here the development of his reflections. We all have recourse to the patrimony he has bequeathed to us and can draw abundantly from his witness. May he be a model for us and may his sense of responsibility for the Church and for the believers entrusted to the Bishop's care be an incentive to us.

Diocesan priests

The first collaborators of the Bishop in the realization of his tasks are the priests; the Bishop's concern should be addressed to them before anyone else.

John Paul II wrote: "By his manner of life, a Bishop demonstrates that the Christ 'as Model' lives on and still speaks to us today. One could say that a Diocese reflects the manner of life of its Bishop.

His virtues - chastity, a spirit of poverty and prayer, simplicity, sensitivity of conscience - will, as it were, be written into the hearts of his priests. They, in their turn, will convey these values to the faithful entrusted to their care, and in this way young people can be led to make a generous response to Christ's call" (*Rise, Let Us Be on Our Way!*, Paulines Publications Africa, 2004, p. 129).

The example the Bishop sets is extremely important: he must not only have an irreproachable lifestyle but also loving concern, so that the Christian virtues of which John Paul II wrote may deeply penetrate the souls of the priests in his Diocese.

For this reason, the Bishop should pay special attention to the quality of seminarians' formation. It is necessary to keep in mind not only the intellectual training of priests-to-be for their future tasks, but also their spiritual and emotional formation.

At the Synod of 1991, the Bishops expressed their desire for a larger number of spiritual directors in seminaries who would be well qualified to carry out the demanding task of forming spirits and of ascertaining the emotional readiness of seminarians to take on priestly tasks.

It is worth returning to this request. The Document of the Congregation for Catholic Education on the admission of candidates to sacred orders has recently been published. I ask you, dear Brothers, to put into practice all its directives.

It is important that the process of intellectual and spiritual formation should not end with the period at the seminary. Continuing formation for priests is vital. I know that great importance is attributed to it in the Polish Dioceses. Courses, retreat days, spiritual exercises and other meetings are organized, during which priests can share their problems and pastoral successes, and strengthen one another in faith and pastoral enthusiasm. I ask you to continue this practice.

The Bishop, for his part, is called as Pastor to surround his priests with fatherly care. He should organize his own schedule in such a way as to have time for the priests, to listen to them attentively and help them in their difficulties. In the case of a vocational crisis, to which priests can fall prey, the Bishop must do his best to sustain them and restore to them their original dynamism and love for Christ and for the Church. Even when a reprimand is necessary, fatherly love must not be lacking.

I thank God because he continues to lavish upon Poland the grace of numerous vocations. The Southern Region, which you represent, dear Brothers, is particularly rich in vocations.

Considering the enormous needs on the part of the universal Church, I ask you to encourage your priests to do their missionary service or pastoral work in countries where clergy are scarce. It seems that today this is a special task and, in a certain sense, also a duty of the Church in Poland.

In the sending of priests abroad, however, especially to the missions, remember to assure them both of your spiritual support and adequate material resources.

Religious orders

John Paul II wrote: "The religious orders never caused me any problems, and my relations with all of them were good. They were a great help to me in my mission as a Bishop. My thoughts also turn to the great reserves of spiritual energy found in the contemplative orders" (*ibid.*, p. 120).

The diversity of charisms and of the services carried out by men and women religious and members of the secular institutes of consecrated life is a great enrichment for the Church. The Bishop can and must encourage them in order to integrate them into the diocesan programme for evangelization and for them to take on pastoral tasks, in conformity with their charism, in collaboration with the priests and the lay community.

Although religious communities and individual consecrated persons are subject by law to their own superiors, they are also "subject to the authority of Bishops, whom they are obliged to follow with devoted humility and respect, in those matters that involve the care of souls, the public exercise of divine worship and other works of the apostolate", as the *Code of Canon Law* declares ([can. 678](#) [1](#)).

Furthermore, the Code invites both diocesan Bishops and religious Superiors to proceed "in

organizing the works of the apostolate of Religious... after consultation with each other" ([can. 678 3](#)).

I strongly encourage you, Brothers, to surround with care the religious communities of women that are located in your Dioceses. The Sisters, who carry out a variety of services in the Church, deserve supreme respect and their work must be recognized and properly appreciated. They should not be deprived of adequate spiritual support and the possibility of intellectual development and growth in the faith.

I recommend in particular that you take to heart the future of the contemplative orders. May their presence in the Diocese, their prayers and their sacrifices always be a support and a help to you. For your part, seek to meet their needs, even practical ones.

In recent years, we have unfortunately seen religious vocations dwindling, especially among women. It is necessary, therefore, together with the religious superiors responsible, to reflect on the causes of this state of affairs and consider how it might be possible to rekindle and sustain new female vocations.

The laity

The words of my great Predecessor introduce us into a reflection on the role of lay people in the work of evangelization: "The laity can accomplish their proper vocation in the world and attain holiness not only through their active involvement in helping the poor and needy, but also by imbuing society with a Christian spirit as they carry out their professional duties and offer an example of Christian family life" (*Rise, Let Us*, p. 115).

In times when, as John Paul II wrote, "European culture gives the impression of 'silent apostasy' on the part of people who have all that they need and who live as if God does not exist" (*Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 9), the Church never ceases to proclaim to the world that Jesus Christ is her hope. In this work, the role of lay people is irreplaceable. Their witness of faith is particularly eloquent and effective because it is borne in daily reality and in areas which are difficult for a priest to gain access.

One of the main goals of lay people's activity is the moral renewal of society, which cannot be superficial, partial or instant. It must be marked by a deep transformation in the ethos of human beings, that is, by the acceptance of an appropriate hierarchy of values that should shape attitudes.

A specific task of the laity is participation in public and political life. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, John Paul II recalled that "every person has a right and duty to participate in public life" (n. 42). The Church does not identify with any political party, community or system.

On the other hand, she always recalls that lay people involved in politics must give a clear and courageous witness of Christian values, which they must reassert and defend should they be threatened. They should do so publicly, in political debates and in the mass media.

One of the important tasks which derives from the process of European integration is to be courageously concerned with preserving the Catholic and national character of Poles. The dialogue initiated by Catholic lay people concerning political issues will prove effective and useful to the common good if it is based on love of the truth, a spirit of service, and solidarity in the commitment to the common good.

I urge you, dear Brothers, to support this lay service, with respect for a just political autonomy. I have listed only a few forms of lay commitment in the work of evangelization. Others, such as the pastoral care of the family and youth or charitable activities, will be the topic of a subsequent reflection at my meeting with the third group of Polish Bishops. I now express the hope that harmonious collaboration with all the states of life in the Church under your enlightened guidance will lead to the transformation of the world in the spirit of Christ's Gospel.

As I entrust your Episcopal ministry to Our Lady, I bless you all with affection. Praised be Jesus Christ!

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