



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*Chicago
Friday, 5 October 1979*

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. May I tell you very simply how grateful I am to you for your invitation to come to the United States. It is an immense joy for me to make this pastoral visit, and in particular, to be here with you today.

On this occasion I thank you, not only for your invitation, not only for everything you have done to prepare for my visit, but also for your partnership in the Gospel from the time of my election as Pope. I thank you for your service to God's holy people, for your fidelity to Christ our Lord, and for your unity with my predecessors and with me in the Church and in the College of Bishops.

I wish at this time to render public homage to a long tradition of fidelity to the Apostolic See on the part of the American Hierarchy. During the course of two centuries, this tradition has edified your people, authenticated your apostolate, and enriched the universal Church.

Moreover, in your presence today, I wish to acknowledge with deep appreciation the fidelity of your faithful and the renowned vitality that they have shown in Christian life. This vitality has been manifested not only in the sacramental practice of communities but also in abundant fruits of the Holy Spirit. With great zeal your people have endeavored to build up the Kingdom of God by means of the Catholic school and through all catechetical efforts. An evident concern for others has been a real part of American Catholicism, and today I thank the American Catholics for their generosity. Their support has benefited the dioceses of the United States, and a widespread

network of charitable works and self-help projects, including those sponsored by Catholic Belief Services and the Campaign for Human Development. Moreover, the help given to the missions by the Church in the United States remains a lasting contribution to the cause of Christ's Gospel. Because your faithful have been very generous to the Apostolic See, my predecessors have been assisted in meeting the burdens of their office; and thus, in the exercise of their worldwide mission of charity, they have been able to extend help to those in need, thereby showing the concern of the universal Church for all humanity. For me then this is *an hour of solemn gratitude*.

2. But even more, this is *an hour of ecclesial communion* and fraternal love. I come to you as a brother Bishop: one who, like yourselves, has known the hopes and challenges of a local church; one who has worked within the structures of a diocese, who has collaborated within the framework of an Episcopal Conference; one who has known the exhilarating experience of collegiality in an Ecumenical Council as exercised by Bishops together with him who both presided over this collegial assembly and was recognized by it as *totius Ecclesiae Pastor*—invested with "full, supreme and universal power over the Church" (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 22). I come to you as one who has been personally edified and enriched by participation in the Synod of Bishops; one who was supported and assisted by the fraternal interest and self-giving of American Bishops who travelled to Poland in order to express solidarity with the Church in my country. I come as one who found deep spiritual consolation for my pastoral activity in the encouragement of the Roman Pontiffs with whom, and under whom, I served God's people, and in particular in the encouragement of Paul VI, whom I looked upon not only as Head of the College of Bishops, but also as my own spiritual father. And today, under the sign of collegiality and because of a mysterious design of God's providence, I, your brother in Jesus, now come to you as Successor of Peter in the See of Rome, and therefore as Pastor of the whole Church.

Because of my personal pastoral responsibility, and because of our common pastoral responsibility for the people of God in the United States, I desire to strengthen you in your ministry of faith as local Pastors, and to support you in your individual and joint pastoral activities by encouraging you to stand fast in the holiness and truth of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in you I desire to honor Jesus Christ, the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls (cf. *1 Pt 2* :25).

Because we have been called to be shepherds of the flock, we realize that we must present ourselves as humble servants of the Gospel. Our leadership will be effective only to the extent that our own discipleship is genuine—to the extent that the Beatitudes have become the inspiration of our lives, to the extent that our people really find in us the kindness, simplicity of life and universal charity that they expect.

We who, by divine mandate, must proclaim the duties of the Christian law, and who must call our people to constant conversion and renewal, know that Saint Paul's invitation applies above all to ourselves: "You must put on the new man created in God's image, whose justice and holiness are born of truth" (*Eph 4* :24).

3. *The holiness of personal conversion* is indeed the condition for our fruitful ministry as Bishops of the Church. It is our union with Jesus Christ that determines the credibility of our witness to the Gospel and the supernatural effectiveness of our activity. We can convincingly proclaim "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (*Eph 3:8*) only if we maintain fidelity to the love and friendship of Jesus, only if we continue to live in the faith of the Son of God.

God has given a great gift to the American Hierarchy in recent years: the canonization of John Neumann. An American Bishop is officially held up by the Catholic Church to be an exemplary servant of the Gospel and shepherd of God's people, above all because of his great love of Christ. On the occasion of the canonization, Paul VI asked : "What is the meaning of this extraordinary event, the meaning of this canonization?". And he answered, saying : "It is the celebration of holiness". And this holiness of Saint John Neumann was expressed in brotherly love, in pastoral charity, and in zealous service by one who was the Bishop of a Diocese and an authentic disciple of Christ.

During the canonization, Paul VI went on to say: "Our ceremony today is indeed the celebration of holiness. At the same time, it is a prophetic anticipation—for the Church, for the United States, for the world—of a renewal of love: love for God, love for neighbor". As Bishops, we are called to exercise in the Church this prophetic role of love and, therefore, of holiness.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, we must all be deeply convinced that holiness is the first priority in our lives and in our ministry. In this context, as Bishops we see the immense value of prayer : the liturgical prayer of the Church, our prayer together, our prayer alone. In recent times many of you have found that the practice of making spiritual retreats together with your brother Bishops is indeed a help to that holiness born of truth. May God sustain you in this initiative: so that each of you, and all of you together, may fulfill your role as a sign of holiness offered to God's people on their pilgrimage to the Father. May you yourselves, like Saint John Neumann, also be a prophetic anticipation of holiness. The people need to have Bishops whom they can look upon as leaders in the quest for holiness—Bishops who are trying to anticipate prophetically in their own lives the attainment of the goal to which they are leading the faithful.

4. Saint Paul points out *the relationship of justice and holiness to truth* (cf. *Eph 4 :24*). Jesus himself, in his priestly prayer, asks his Father to consecrate his disciples by means of truth ; and he adds : "Your word is truth"—*Sermo tuus veritas est* (*Jn 17 :17*). And he goes on to say that he consecrates himself for the sake of the disciples, so that they themselves may be consecrated in truth. Jesus consecrated himself so that the disciples might be consecrated, set apart, by the communication of what he was: the Truth. Jesus tells his Father: "I gave them your word"—"Your word is truth" (*Jn 17 :14, 17*).

The holy word of God, which is truth, is communicated by Jesus to his Church, but only after he had implanted in his Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, a special charism to guard and

transmit intact the word of God.

With great wisdom, John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council. Reading the signs of the times, he knew that what was needed was a Council of a pastoral nature, a Council that would reflect the great pastoral love and care of Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd for his people. But he knew that a pastoral Council—to be genuinely effective—would need a strong doctrinal basis. And precisely for this reason, precisely because the word of God is the only basis for every pastoral initiative, John XXIII on the opening day of the Council—October 11, 1962—made the following statement : "*The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be more effectively guarded and taught*".

This explains Pope John's inspiration; this is what the new Pentecost was to be: this is why the Bishops of Church—in the greatest manifestation of collegiality in the history of the world—were called together: "so that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be more effectively guarded and taught".

In our time, Jesus was consecrating anew his disciples by truth; and he was doing it by means of an Ecumenical Council; he was transmitting by the power of the Holy Spirit his Father's word to new generations. And, what John XXIII considered to be the aim of the Council, I consider as the aim of this postconciliar period.

For this reason, in my first meeting [last November](#) with American Bishops on their *ad limina* visit I stated: "This then is my own deepest hope today for the pastors of the Church in America, as well as for all the pastors of the universal Church : that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be more effectively guarded and taught". In the word of God is the salvation of the world. By means of the proclamation of the word of God, the Lord continues in his Church and through his Church to consecrate his disciples, communicating to them the truth that he himself is.

For this reason the Vatican Council emphasized the Bishop's role of announcing the full truth of the Gospel and proclaiming "the whole mystery of Christ" (*Christus Dominus*, 12). This teaching was constantly repeated by Paul VI for the edification of the universal Church. It was explicitly proclaimed by John Paul I on the very day he died and I too have frequently reaffirmed it in my own pontificate. And I am sure that my successors and your successors will hold this teaching until Christ comes again in glory.

5. Among the papers that were left to me by Paul VI there is a letter written to him by a Bishop, on the occasion of the latter's appointment to the Episcopacy. It is a beautiful letter; and in the form of a resolution it includes *a clear affirmation of the Bishop's role* of guarding and teaching the deposit of Christian doctrine, of proclaiming the whole mystery of Christ. Because of the splendid insights that this letter offers, I would like to share part of it with you.

As he pledged himself to be loyal in obedience to Paul VI and to his successors, the Bishop wrote: "I am resolved:

— "To be faithful and constant in proclaiming the Gospel of Christ.

— "To maintain the content of faith, entire and uncorrupted, as handed down by the Apostles and professed by the Church at all times and places".

And then with equal insight, this Bishop went on to tell Paul VI that, with the help of Almighty God, he was determined :

— "To build up the Church as the Body of Christ, and to remain united to it by your link, with the Order of Bishops, under the Successor of Saint Peter the Apostle.

— "To show kindness and compassion in the name of the Lord to the poor and to strangers and to and to all who are in need.

— "To seek out the sheep who stray and to gather them into the fold of the Lord.

— "To pray without ceasing for the people of God, to carry out the highest duties of the priesthood in such a way as to afford no grounds for reproof".

This then is the edifying witness of a Bishop, an American Bishop, to the episcopal ministry of holiness and truth. These words are a credit to him and a credit to all of you.

A challenge for our age—and for every age in the Church—is to bring the message of the Gospel to the very core of our people's lives—so that they may live the full truth of their humanity, their Redemption and their adoption in Jesus Christ—that they may be enriched with "the justice and holiness of truth".

6. In the exercise of your ministry of truth, as Bishops of the United States *you have, through statements and pastoral letters, collectively offered the word of God to your people*, showing its relevance to daily life, pointing to the power it has to uplift and heal, and at the same time upholding its inherent demands. Three years ago you did this in a very special way through your Pastoral Letter, so beautifully entitled "To Live in Christ Jesus". This Letter, in which you offered your people the service of truth, contains a number of points to which I wish to allude today. With compassion, understanding and love, you transmitted a message that is linked to Revelation and to the mystery of faith. And so with great pastoral charity you spoke of God's love, of humanity and of sin—and of the meaning of Redemption and of life in Christ. You spoke of the word of Christ as it affects individuals, the family, the community and nations. You spoke of justice and peace, of charity, of truth and friendship. And you spoke of some special questions affecting the moral life of

Christians : the moral life in both its individual and social aspects.

You spoke explicitly of the Church's duty to be faithful to the mission entrusted to her. And precisely for this reason you spoke of certain issues that needed a clear reaffirmation, because Catholic teaching in their regard had been challenged, denied, or in practice violated. You repeatedly proclaimed human rights and human dignity and the incomparable worth of people of every racial and ethnic origin, declaring that "racial antagonism and discrimination are among the most persistent and destructive evils of our nation". You forcefully rejected the oppression of the weak, the manipulation of the vulnerable, the waste of goods and resources, the ceaseless preparations for war, unjust social structures and policies, and all crimes by and against individuals and against creation.

With the candor of the Gospels, the compassion of pastors and the charity of Christ, you faced the question of the indissolubility of marriage, rightly stating: "The covenant between a man and a woman joined in Christian marriage is as indissoluble and irrevocable as God's love for his people and Christ's love for his Church".

In exalting the beauty of marriage you rightly spoke against both the ideology of contraception and contraceptive acts, as did the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. And I myself today with the same conviction of Paul VI ratify the teaching of this Encyclical, which was put forth by my predecessor "by virtue of the mandate entrusted to us by Christ" (AAS, 60, 1968, p. 485).

In portraying the sexual union between husband and wife as a special expression of their covenanted love, you rightly stated : "Sexual intercourse is a moral and human good only within marriage, outside marriage it is wrong".

As "men with the message of truth and the power of God" (2 Cor 6 :7), as authentic teachers of God's law and as compassionate pastors you also rightly stated: "Homosexual activity ... as distinguished from homosexual orientation, is morally wrong". In the clarity of this truth, you exemplified the real charity of Christ; you did not betray those people who, because of homosexuality, are confronted with difficult moral problems, as would have happened if, in the name of understanding and compassion, or for any other reason, you had held out false hope to any brother or sister. Rather, by your witness to the truth of humanity in God's plan, you effectively manifested fraternal love, upholding the true dignity, the true human dignity, of those who look to Christ's Church for the guidance which comes from the light of God's word.

You also gave witness to the truth, thereby serving all humanity, when, echoing the teaching of the Council—"From the moment of conception life must be guarded with the greatest care" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 51)—you reaffirmed the right to life and the inviolability of every human life, including the life of unborn children. You clearly said: "To destroy these innocent unborn children is an unspeakable crime ... Their right to life must be recognized and fully protected by the law".

And just as you defended the unborn in the truth of their being, so also you clearly spoke up for the aged, asserting: "Euthanasia or mercy killing ... is a grave moral evil ... Such killing is incompatible with respect for human dignity and reverence for life".

And in your pastoral interest for your people in all their needs—including housing, education, health care, employment, and the administration of justice—you gave further witness to the fact that all aspects of human life are sacred. You were, in effect, proclaiming that the Church will never abandon man, nor his temporal needs, as she leads humanity to salvation and eternal life. And because the Church's greatest act of fidelity to humanity and her "fundamental function in every age and particularly in ours is to direct man's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity toward the mystery of God" (*Redemptor Hominis*, 10)—because of this you rightly alluded to the dimension of eternal life. It is indeed in this proclamation of eternal life that we hold up a great motive of hope for our people, against the onslaughts of materialism, against rampant secularism and against moral permissiveness.

7. A sense of pastoral responsibility has also been genuinely expressed by *individual Bishops* in their ministry as local pastors. To the great credit of their authors I would cite but two recent example of Pastoral Letters issued in the United States. Both are example of responsible pastoral initiatives. One of them deals with the issue of racism and vigorously denounces it. The other refers to homosexuality and deals with the issue, as should be done, with clarity and great pastoral charity, thus rendering a real service to truth and to those who are seeking this liberating truth.

Brothers in Christ: as we proclaim the truth in love, it is not possible for us to avoid all criticism; nor is it possible to please everyone. And so we are humbly convinced that God is with us in our ministry of truth, and that he "did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim 1 :7).

One of the greatest rights of the faithful is to receive the word of God in its purity and integrity as guaranteed by the Magisterium of the universal Church : the authentic Magisterium of the Bishops of the Catholic Church teaching in union with the Pope. Dear Brothers: we can be assured that the Holy Spirit is assisting us in our teaching if we remain absolutely faithful to the universal Magisterium.

In this regard I wish to add an extremely important point which I recently emphasized in speaking to a group of Bishops making their *ad limina* visit : "In the community of the faithful—which must always maintain Catholic unity with the Bishops and the Apostolic See—there are great insights of faith. The Holy Spirit is active in enlightening the minds of the faithful with his truth, and in inflaming their hearts with his love. But these insights of faith and this *sensus fidelium* are not independent of the Magisterium of the Church, which is an instrument of the same Holy Spirit and is assisted by him. It is only when the faithful have been nourished by the word of God, faithfully transmitted in its purity and integrity, that their own charisms are fully operative and fruitful. Once

the word of God is faithfully proclaimed to the community and is accepted, it brings forth fruits of justice and holiness of life in abundance. But the dynamism of the community in understanding and living the word of God depends on its receiving intact the *depositum fidei*; and for this precise purpose a special apostolic and pastoral charism has been given to the Church. It is one and the same Spirit of truth who directs the hearts of the faithful and who guarantees the Magisterium of the pastors of the flock" ([Address to Indian Bishops, May 31, 1979](#)).

8. *One of the greatest truths of which we are the humble custodians is the doctrine of the Church's unity*—that unity which is tarnished on the human face of the Church by every form of sin, but which subsists indestructibly in the Catholic Church (cf. [Lumen Gentium](#), 8; [Unitatis Redintegratio](#), 2, 3). A consciousness of sin calls us incessantly to conversion. The will of Christ impels us to work earnestly and perseveringly for unity with all our Christian brethren, being mindful that the unity we seek is one of perfect faith, a unity in truth and love. We must pray and study together, knowing however that intercommunion between divided Christians is not the answer to Christ's appeal for perfect unity. And with God's help we will continue to work humbly and resolutely to remove the real divisions that still exist, and thus to restore that full unity in faith which is the condition for sharing in the Eucharist (cf. [Address of May 4, 1979](#)). The commitment of the Ecumenical Council belongs to each of us; as does the Testament of Paul VI. who writing on Ecumenism stated: "Let the work of drawing near to our separated brethren go on, with much understanding, with great love; but without deviating from the true Catholic doctrine".

9. As Bishops who are servants of truth, we are also called to be *servants of unity, in the communion of the Church*.

In *the communion of holiness* we ourselves are called, as I mentioned above, to conversion, so that we may preach with convincing power the message of Jesus : "Reform your lives and believe in the Gospel". We have a special role to play in safeguarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation, so that, in fidelity to a divine precept, we and our people may experience in our innermost being that "grace has far surpassed sin" (*Rom 5 :20*). I, too, ratify the prophetic call of Paul VI, who urged the Bishops to help their priests to "deeply understand how closely they collaborate through the Sacrament of Penance with the Savior in the work of conversion" ([Address of April 20, 1978](#)). In this regard I confirm again the Norms of *Sacramentum Paenitentiae* which so wisely emphasize the ecclesial dimension of the Sacrament of Penance and indicate the precise limits of General Absolution, just as Paul VI did in his *ad limina* address to the American Bishops.

Conversion by its very nature is the condition for that union with God which reaches its greatest expression in the Eucharist. Our union with Christ in the Eucharist presupposes, in turn, that our hearts are set on conversion, that they are pure. This is indeed an important part of our preaching to the people. In my Encyclical I endeavored to express it in these words : "The Christ who calls to the Eucharistic banquet is always the same Christ who exhorts us to penance and repeats his 'Repent'. Without this constant and ever-renewed endeavor for conversion, partaking of the

Eucharist would lack its full redeeming effectiveness ..." (*Redemptor Hominis*, 20). In the face of a widespread phenomenon of our time, namely that many of our people who are among the great numbers who receive Communion make little use of Confession, we must emphasize Christ's basic call to conversion. We must also stress that the personal encounter with the forgiving Jesus in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a divine means which keeps alive in our hearts and in our communities a consciousness of sin in its perennial and tragic reality, and which actually brings forth, by the action of Jesus and the power of his Spirit, fruits of conversion in justice and holiness of life. By this Sacrament we are renewed in fervor, strengthened in our resolves and buoyed up by divine encouragement.

10. As chosen leaders in *a community of praise and prayer*, it is our special joy to offer the Eucharist and to give people a sense of their vocation as an Easter people, with the "alleluia" as their song. And let us always recall that the validity of all liturgical development and the effectiveness of every liturgical sign presupposes the great principle that the Catholic liturgy is theocentric, and that it is above all "the worship of divine majesty" (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 33), in union with Jesus Christ. Our people have a supernatural sense whereby they look for reverence in all liturgy, especially in what touches the mystery of the Eucharist. With deep faith our people understand that the Eucharist—in the Mass and outside the Mass—is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and therefore deserves the worship that is given to the living God and to him alone.

As ministers of *a community of service*, it is our privilege to proclaim the truth of Christ's union with his members in his Body, the Church. Hence we commend all service rendered in his name and to his brethren (cf. *Mt 25 :45*).

In *a community of witness and evangelization* may our testimony be clear and without reproach. In this regard the Catholic press and the other means of social communication are called to fulfill a special role of great dignity at the service of truth and charity. The Church's aim in employing and sponsoring these media is linked to her mission of evangelization and of service to humanity; through the media the Church hopes to promote ever more effectively the uplifting message of the Gospel.

11. And each individual Church over which you preside and which you serve is *a community founded on the word of God and acting in the truth of this word*. It is in fidelity to the communion of the universal Church that our local unity is authenticated and made stable. In *the communion of the universal Church* local Churches find their own identity and enrichment ever more clearly. But all of this requires that the individual Churches should maintain complete openness toward the universal Church.

And this is the mystery that we celebrate today in proclaiming the holiness and truth and unity of the episcopal ministry.

Brothers : this ministry of ours makes us accountable to Christ and to his Church. Jesus Christ, the chief Shepherd (*1 Pt 5 :4*), loves us and sustains us. It is he who transmits his Father's word and consecrates us in truth, so that each of us may say in turn of our people: "For them I consecrate myself for their sake now, that they may be consecrated in truth" (*Jn 17 :19*).

Let us pray for and devote special energy to promoting and maintaining vocations to the sacred priesthood, so that the pastoral care of the priestly ministry may be ensured for future generations. I ask you to call upon parents and families, upon priests, religious and laity to unite in fulfilling this vital responsibility of the entire community. And to the young people themselves let us hold up the full challenge of following Christ and of embracing his invitation with full generosity.

As we ourselves pursue every day the justice and holiness born of truth, let us look to Mary, Mother of Jesus, Queen of Apostles, and Cause of our Joy. May Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and Saint John Neumann pray for you, and for all the people whom you are called to serve in holiness and truth and in the unity of Christ and his Church.

Dear Brothers: "Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with unfailing love" (*Eph 6 :24*).

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