



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO A GROUP OF BISHOPS FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM» VISIT**

*Saturday, 22 October 1983*

*Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,*

1. Some weeks ago, during another *ad Limina* visit, I spoke about various aspects of *the Bishop's identity as a living sign of Jesus Christ*, within the context of the sacramentality of the Church. I would now like to pursue that general theme, reflecting with you on the Bishop's role as *a minister of God's word*, "a minister of the Gospel" (*Eph. 3, 7*). For indeed, it is as a minister of God's word, acting in the power of the Holy Spirit and through the charism of his episcopal office, that the Bishop manifests Christ to the world, makes Christ present in the community, and effectively communicates Christ to all who wide their hearts.

As a minister of the Gospel, the Bishop is a living expression of Christ, who, as the Incarnate World, is himself the supreme revelation and communication of God. The ministry of the word clearly defines our identity as servants of Jesus Christ, called to be apostles and "set apart to proclaim the Gospel of God" (*Rom. 1, 1*). *By preaching and teaching we fulfill our specific mission*. Each of us thus actuates his special charism to be a living sign of the Christ who says: "I must proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God . . . because is what I was sent to do" (*Luc. 4, 43*).

2. The Second Vatican Council captures the notion of our identity when it states: "Among the principal duties of Bishops, the preaching of the Gospel occupies an eminent place. For Bishops are heralds of the faith who lead new disciples to Christ. They are authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach to the people committed to them the faith they must believe and put into practice" (*Lumen Gentium*, 25). As preachers and teachers, the Bishops have a vital role to fulfill, a vital message to communicate. *Bishops exist in order to proclaim God's free gift of salvation* offered to humanity in Jesus Christ and effected through his

## Paschal Mystery.

All the activities of Bishops must be directed to proclaiming the Gospel, precisely because the Gospel is “the power of God leading everyone who believes in it to salvation” (*Rom.* 1, 16). Salvation is found in the Gospel and the Gospel is received in faith. Hence everything the Bishop does should be directed toward helping people to give “the obedience of faith” (*ibid.* 1, 5) to God’s word, helping them to embrace the full content of Christ’s teaching. The role of the Bishop as minister of the Gospel is profoundly pastoral, and, precisely *as the proclamation of God’s word, it reaches its apex in the Eucharist*, in which the work of our salvation is sacramentally actuated.

3. The Council emphasized that God wills that *everything he has revealed* for the salvation of the world *should be preserved in its full integrity and handed on to future generations*. For this reason Christ commissioned his Apostles to proclaim the Gospel, and his Apostles transmitted their own teaching role to their successors, the Bishops (Cfr. *Dei Verbum*, 7). The Council also declares that *the episcopal office of teaching in the Church is conferred by episcopal consecration and can be exercised only in hierarchical communion* with the head and the members of the College of Bishops (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 21). I mention these truths to indicate just how much the ministry of the word is linked to our own sacramental identity and to our whole episcopal mission. Our lives as Bishops revolve around the mandate of Christ to teach everything that he commanded the Apostles. What is more, our apostolic ministry is endowed with a sharing in that full authority given to Jesus, which he himself evoked before he sent his disciples forth to make disciples of all nations, to baptize and to teach. Our ministry is likewise strengthened by that special abiding presence of the Lord with us until the end of the world (Cfr. *Matth.* 28, 18-20). All of this constitutes the episcopal charism, sacramentally transmitted, sacramentally received, sacramentally exercised.

Our response as Bishops to Christ’s mandate must be expressed in *a vital proclamation*, through preaching and teaching, *of all the truths of faith*: the truths that lead our people to salvation, the truths that invite our people to give the obedience of faith. The Bishops exercise the teaching role of the Apostles precisely in order “to keep the Gospel forever whole and alive within the Church” (*Dei Verbum*, 7). For this reason, the Council’s Decree on the Bishops’ Pastoral Office encourages Bishops explicitly to expound, in the power of the Holy Spirit, “the whole mystery of Christ” (*Christus Dominus*, 12).

4. It is easy to see how the Bishop’s role of vital preaching, faithful custody of the deposit of faith, and authoritative teaching exercised in union with the Pope and the whole College of Bishops also involves *the duty to defend the word of God against whatever would compromise its purity and integrity*. If we understand the nature of the Church, in which the Paschal Mystery is lived out, we will not be surprised to find, in every generation of the Church’s life, including our own, not only sin, but also some measure of error and falsehood. A serene sense of realism and Church history will, however, help us to exercise our role as authentic teachers of God’s word without either

exaggerating or minimizing the existence of error and falsehood, which our pastoral responsibility obliges us to identify and to reject. Our fidelity to the word of God also requires us to understand and put into practice that great reality proclaimed by the Council: “The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ” (*Dei Verbum*, 10).

In studying and listening to the word of God, in guarding and explaining the deposit of faith, in preaching and teaching the mystery of Christ, *vigilance and fidelity on the part of Bishops are synonyms for pastoral love*. The words Paul spoke to Timothy are relevant for each one of us: “I charge you to preach the word, to stay with this task whether convenient or inconvenient - correcting, reproving, appealing - constantly teaching and never losing patience . . . Be steady and self-possessed; put up with hardship, perform your work as an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim. 4, 2. 5). We find immense consolation and strength in the realization that we exercise our special service to the word of God through a divine mandate, with the help of the Holy Spirit and in virtue of a sacramentally conferred charism.

5. The fruitful exercise of the Magisterium requires us to reflect on various aspects of the mystery of God’s word and its transmission in the Church. We know that *the authentic Magisterium of the Church is characterized by unity*. It makes no claim to be above the word of God; rather it seeks humbly to serve that word, through its specific charism, exercised in the name of Christ and by his authority. As such, the Magisterium has no parallel in the Church. *There is only one authentic ecclesial Magisterium*, and it belongs to the Bishops. On the part of individual Bishops, the communion of teaching with the Pope and the whole College is of extreme importance, because it is the guarantee of authentic doctrine and of the supernatural effectiveness of every pastoral initiative.

The teaching charism of the Bishops is *unique in its responsibility*. As such it must be exercised personally and cannot be delegated. By episcopal consecration the Bishop has a unique relationship to Jesus Christ the Teacher; by Christ’s authority he is enabled to teach with particular effectiveness. In a unique way he is a living sign of Jesus Christ, proclaiming God’s word with special power.

*The priests are intimately related to the sacramental ministry of the Bishop*, and with the Bishop, *as co-workers of the episcopal order*, they exercise their own proper responsibility for the word of God. This relationship of ours to our priests in the word of God gives us a special motive for a deep pastoral and fraternal love for them, as well as an opportunity to thank God for their partnership in the Gospel.

6. At the same time the Bishops are servant pastors in their local Churches, where *the whole ecclesial community* - priests, deacons, religious and laity - collaborate with them, in accordance

with the constitution of the Church, to proclaim and live the word of God. The Bishops' sacramental service to the word of God is ordered to the well-being of the entire community of the faithful. The Bishops guide the faithful to understanding the word of God. The very proclamation of the word of God by the Bishops has a power that leads to the assent of faith. And after this assent of faith has been given, the faithful themselves contribute to the further growth of the Church's understanding of God's word (Cfr. *Dei Verbum*, 8), and, in this sense, faith develops in each succeeding generation of the Church. But, in the words of Saint Vincent of Lerins, "it must truly be development of the faith, not alteration of the faith . . . The understanding . . . of individuals as well as of the whole Church ought then to make great and vigorous progress with the passing of the ages and the centuries, but only along its own line of development, that is, with the same doctrine, the same meaning and the same import" (*First Instruction*, ch. 23). Understanding the development of doctrine in this way, we know that the present or "current" teaching of the Church does not admit of a development that is either a reversal or a contradiction.

7. Through the exercise of their own charism, the Bishops provide a great service to the faithful and assist them to carry out *their own role of contributing to the growth of the faith*. In this regard I would repeat once again what I said in Chicago to all the Bishops of the United States: "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 charism 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 guarantees the Magisterium of the pastors of the flock" (IOANNIS PAULI PP.II, *Allocutio ad sacros Praesules Conferentiae Episcopalis Foederatarum Civitatum Americae Septentrionalis habita*, 7, die 5 oct. 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II/2 [1979] 639).

8. I wish at this time, as I did during my visit to the Catholic University of America, to say *a special word of appreciation for the role of the theologians* in the Church, and in particular for the assistance that they give to the Bishops and the service that they render to the faith. Since theology receives its object from faith, and since it is vitally concerned with the sacred deposit of revelation, there are many elements that are common to the role of Bishops and to that of theologians. Although in different ways, both Bishops and theologians are called upon to guard the word of God, to study it more deeply, to explain it, to teach it, to defend it. Both Bishops and theologians are called to live and work and pray for the same great cause: "That the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph" (*2 Thess.* 3, 1). Theologians have special qualifications for

studying and elucidating the reasons for the doctrinal and moral teaching of the Church. By their training and scholarship, and following their specific method, theologians are in a position to probe and illustrate the data of faith and the interpretation that the Magisterium gives of these data in doctrine and morals.

In their role of teaching theology, theologians are called upon to open the treasure of faith ever wider and to *inculcate respect for the Magisterium*, which in turn guarantees the interpretation of God's word. It is this respect for the Magisterium that is indeed "*a constituent element of the theological method*" (cf. PAULI VI, *Allocutio ad sacros Galliae Praesules Conferentiae Episcopalis regionis centralis et orientalis occasione visitationis "ad limina" coram admissos*, die 20 iun. 1977: *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, XV [1977] 623). On their part the Bishops know that the exercise of their own sacramental charism is linked to reading, study, consultation and, above all, prayer. But it remains a charism at the service of the faith of the whole Church.

Venerable and dear Brothers, in inviting you to reflect with me on our configuration to Jesus Christ in our ministry of the word, I desire with all my heart *to confirm you in your deepest identity as Bishops of the Church of God*. The word of God is our life and ministry, our joy and our strength, our wisdom and our hope. But even more, it is the salvation of our people, their vital contact with the Lord. Our proclamation of God's word is linked to a special sacramental power, and our teaching of God's word is guaranteed by the authority of Christ the Teacher. As ministers of the Gospel we are indeed living signs of Jesus Christ. The Council assures us: "In the Bishops . . . our Lord Jesus Christ, the supreme High Priest, is present in the midst of all those who believe" (*Lumen Gentium*, 21).

And may Mary, the Mother of Jesus the Incarnate Word, be with us as we endeavour to communicate to the world the Gospel of her Son.

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