



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF IRELAND
ON OCCASION OF THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT** Thursday, 27 August 1987

Dear Cardinal O'Fiaich and brother Bishops,

1. I am particularly happy to meet you, *the bishops of Ireland*, gathered here on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit. Your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and your report concerning the state of that part of the Church committed to your generous pastoral care, corresponds to a time-honoured ecclesiastical practice. Above all, it expresses and further vivifies the bonds of communion which unite us as Successors of the Apostles, entrusted with governing the house of the living God (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 18). I hope that this meeting will be for you, as it is for me, a moment of intense joy in the Holy Spirit, by whose power we are strengthened and confirmed "for the building up of the body of Christ" (Cfr. *Eph.* 4, 12).

Your presence here brings to mind the long and exemplary history of your people's fidelity to Christ and to his Church. But it speaks also of *the present faith and Christian commitment of your local Churches*. As your brother Bishop, charged with the ministry of unity and charity for the universal Church, I rejoice with you in contemplating God's favour constantly poured out on the Church in Ireland, and I gladly encourage you in your daily response to the many tasks of your Episcopal ministry. As Saint Paul said: "Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart" (Cfr. *Gal.* 6, 9). Seeing you here, I am reminded of the figures of our dear brothers, Archbishop Dermot Ryan and Archbishop Kevin McNamara, who seemed set to serve the Church for many years to come, with the talents and personal qualities which characterized each of them. Yet the Lord, in his own admirable providence, saw fit to bring them quickly to himself, leaving us with the sadness of their absence, but also with the luminous memory of their ministry and leadership. Both were moved in their service of the Church by a profound sense of personal accountability to Christ and a desire to uphold the teachings and guidelines of the Second Vatican Council in all their richness. Their lives evidenced a remarkable closeness to the Lord shrouded in quiet courage and deep humility. Together, let us rejoice in the thought that when the Chief Shepherd appears these good and faithful servants of the Gospel will obtain the unfading crown of glory (Cfr. *1 Petr.* 5, 4).

2. In recent decades your pastoral programming has benefited from regular and detailed studies and surveys of many aspects of the

life of the Church in Irish society. You are undoubtedly grateful to perceive *the strength and authenticity of Christian faith and life in vast sectors of the population*. Your local Churches can count on numerous capable priests, men and women Religious, and lay persons who are active in all areas of ecclesial and civil life. You can draw on the vitality and dynamism of the faithful, and of the young in particular, to respond to the call of charity, mission and service, both at home and in many other parts of the world. The Irish contribution to the Church's missionary activity, in the past as in the present, is a magnificent sign that the grace of God has not been given to you in vain (Cfr. 2 Cor. 6, 1). You are also witnesses of *new ferments of Christian life among the faithful*, through prayer-groups or Bible-study groups, through a more active participation in the Liturgy, and their engagement in many forms of the apostolate. The words of Saint Paul come spontaneously to mind: "We give thanks to God always for you all... remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Cfr. Thess. 1, 2-3).

3. Some of the *special challenges confronting you as pastors* are the result of profound changes taking place in the contemporary world and which are being widely and deeply felt within Irish society. Others are specific of *the call to renewal* which the Second Vatican Council has bequeathed to the Church in the latter part of the twentieth century. In the light of these circumstances your role as Bishops is invested with a particular urgency and responsibility, especially towards the younger generations of Irish men and women who have a right to be helped in every way to enter fully into their spiritual heritage. You are well aware of the serious demands being made on your pastoral leadership. Economic development and higher standards of living have not benefited everyone in like manner. All too often you are witnesses of new and tragic forms of poverty and alienation which tend to affect in particular the old and the young. The scourge of unemployment has struck a heavy blow at Irish society, causing suffering for many families. Other social and cultural transformations, which accompany material development, have led some to become uncertain and confused regarding fundamental truths and values, including what refers to such basic realities as the family and the value of life itself. Many, especially among the young, find it increasingly difficult to acquire a clear and integrated set of principles on which to build their response to life's tasks and responsibilities. The situation is compounded by the aggressive quality of consumerism and the force of selfishness in the individual and in more or less large sectors of society.

4. Much has happened in Irish life since my visit to your country in 1979. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to repeat what I said during the memorable Eucharistic celebration in the Phoenix Park: "Ireland, that has overcome so many difficult moments in her history, is being challenged in a new way today... The challenge that is already with us is the temptation to accept as true freedom what in reality is only a new form of slavery. And so, it becomes all the more urgent to steep ourselves in the truth that comes from Christ, who is 'the way, the truth and the life' (Cfr. Jo. 14, 6), and in the strength that he himself offers us through his Spirit". My prayer for Ireland is that, in building a society capable of responding to the needs of all its people in justice and harmony, the truth that comes from Christ may instruct you in values that conform authentically to human dignity and lead to peace. And may your love of Jesus Christ, so clearly attested to in your history, grow ever more certain and operative in the face of present challenges. In various Pastoral Letters and Statements, you have addressed some of the more

impelling and urgent concerns of your ministry. I recall your Letter, "*Love is for Life*", issued in Lent 1985, and your "*Statement on Marriage, the Family and Divorce*" (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Homilia ad "phoenix Park" in urbe "Dublino" habita*, 3 et 4, die 29 sept. 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II, 2 (1979) 415 et 416), published during the recent public debate in your country on these questions. Your personal witness of fidelity to the Church's teachings and your unity and mutual support within the Episcopal Conference is an essential service to the community of faith over which you preside in love.

5. You have been called to shepherd God's people in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the extraordinary gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church in our times. It is necessary to return time and time again to the documents of the Council in order to have a precise and complete image of the Church herself, of her mission, origin and structure, and of the divine and human elements which constitute her true nature as the sacrament and means of union with God and of the unity of all mankind (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). As bishops it is your task to be imbued with that vision and to communicate it to *your priests*, who share the responsibility for the diocese with you. It will be your constant care to foster among your special collaborators, your priests, a truly spiritual outlook and a convinced attitude of service to God's people. Your priests know that they are set apart for a special ministry within the Church and that they cannot be true ministers of Christ unless they are ministers and dispensers of a life other than this earthly one. At the same time they are aware that they cannot be of effective service to others if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of their brothers and sisters (Cfr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 3). They look to you therefore for an example of the holiness of life and dedication to the pastoral ministry to which all of you together have been called. Regarding them as friends in Jesus Christ (Cfr. *Io. 15, 15*), you will know how to encourage them and sustain them in their difficult but sublime task.

6. The same can be said in its own way in relation to the *men und women Religious* who collaborate with you in building up and increasing the Mystical Body of Christ (Cfr. *Christus Dominus*, 33 ss). The contribution offered by the many Religious Congregations present in Ireland to the life and mission of the Church both at home and abroad is immeasurable. It is extremely important that the entire ecclesial community welcome, respect and encourage their witness of the evangelical counsels as a reminder, in the midst of a growing secularism, of the laws and values of the eschatological kingdom towards which the whole People of God journeys in faith. On their part, Religious themselves are called to further enliven and make even more transparent the radical following of Christ which is at the basis of their special place in the community of faith. In speaking of your priests and Religious, I share with you the *concern* which today affects large sectors of the Church, especially in traditionally Christian countries: the matter of *decreasing ecclesiastical vocations*. This is a question which we must recognize in all its importance and gravity. I am comforted by the interest with which you follow this question in your own dioceses and I take this occasion to echo the needs of the universal Church which owes so much to the missionary activity of Irish bishops, priests, and women and men Religious. While other forms of apostolate and service are to be highly recommended, the young especially need to be challenged to examine the direct call to the priesthood and the religious life. This is a matter in which the faith of the entire ecclesial community is called into play. Every vocation is a unique and personal response to Christ, but in many ways it also reflects the vitality and fruitfulness of the soil in which

it takes shape.⁷ One of the fondest memories of my visit to Ireland was to see so many priests, men and women Religious, missionaries and seminarians gathered at *Maynooth, Ireland's National Seminary*, which is preparing to celebrate its second centenary in 1995. Maynooth has contributed immensely to the life and mission of the Church in Ireland and throughout the world. On the occasion of my visit I expressed the hope, which is not mine alone, but as it were a plea of the entire people of God, that Maynooth would have a future just as great. Now, I understand that the Catholic people of Ireland are being asked to respond to an appeal for special financial support, required to meet urgent needs of the College. I gladly express my solidarity with such an effort, and I pray that Maynooth, as "a school of priestly holiness, an academy of theological learning, a university of Catholic inspiration" will continue in every way to merit the respect which it has achieved throughout the Catholic world (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio in aede Collegii S. Patricii apud "Maynooth" habita*, 1, die 1 oct. 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II, 2, (1979) 487).⁸ I have already mentioned the altogether special grace for the Church on the eve of the third Christian Millennium of the directives and impulses which the Second Vatican Council released into the lifestream of the Catholic community and indeed, in a sense, into the world. The renewal of Christian living which the Council intended is still very much a challenge to our Episcopal ministry.

Much has already been done, and we know that the Lord continues to call the Church in each place to a more dynamic presence in society and culture "by her healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which she strengthens the seams of human society and imbues everyday human activity with a deeper meaning and importance" (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 40). A generous response *to the universal call to holiness constitutes, undoubtedly, the inner force of such a renewal of ecclesial life*. The spiritual energies for service must come from grace and holiness of life, and therefore from those means that promote spiritual progress, especially the Eucharist and the other sacraments.

In recent years appreciation for the Sacrament of Penance has diminished among some. Bishops and priests need to revitalize the frequent reception of this means of grace in order that the Church, the edifice of God's (Cfr. 1 *Cor.* 3, 11), be raised on no other foundation than Christ, the stone which the builders rejected, but which has become the cornerstone (Cfr. *Matth.* 21, 42). Spiritual renewal calls for a deepening of piety, nourished by adequate forms of personal and popular devotion, especially those which have proved their validity in the past. As some examples among many, I mention pilgrimages, penitential traditions and the praying of the Family Rosary which has been traditional in many Irish homes, Such practices should not be discarded simply because they are not new. ⁹ The forthcoming Synod of Bishops on the mission and role of the laity in the Church has been widely received as an occasion for needed reflection on how *the laity* has responded to the Council's *call to assume their specific responsibility*, especially as regards the extension of the kingdom of God in the temporal order. Within the ecclesial community itself lay men and women have taken on many tasks both in the liturgy and in the organisms through which the pastoral and charitable work of the Church is carried out. This is, of course, a positive

development which you will do everything possible to encourage in ways that respond to the nature and mission of the Church herself. Such positive support signifies however that when occupying posts which require their holders to represent the Church's position or teaching in some field, lay persons as well as priests and Religious will in fact *be one with the Church in heart and, mind* and never present opinions which differ from the Church's expressed teaching, thus creating confusion in the minds of the faithful or undermining the certainty of moral principles. This is a requirement of justice as well as an excellent form of ecclesial service. The same applies to commissions and agencies set up by the Episcopal Conference for educational or assistential activities both in Ireland and in other parts of the world. In all of this you, the pastors, have the authority and responsibility to act for the good of the Church. 10. Dear brother bishops, there are many other areas of your episcopal service in which I wish to encourage you and sustain you with my prayers and fraternal support. When I think of the Church in Ireland I see a people "marked with the sign of faith", a people which has shown the depths of its baptismal consecration in fidelity to the word of God and to its ecclesial vocation. I see you making every effort to further the cause of *ecumenical understanding and collaboration* "where reconciliation between Christians takes on a special urgency, but where it also has special resources in the tradition of Christian faith and fidelity to religion which marks both the Catholic and the Protestant communities" (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio in aedibus religiosorum sodalium a S. Dominico in urbe "Dublino" habita ad Auctoritates Christianarum Ecclesiarum*, die 29 sept. 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II, 2, (1979) 445). I see the Catholic Church in Ireland teaching the *ways of peace and solidarity*, and working to change the conditions that generate political violence. Conflict is not inevitable. The peace of Christ can and should reign in the hearts of all. Every new generation of Irish men and women offers new hope that the prejudices of the past and the injustices of the present will finally give way to a society built on respect for the dignity of every human person and on love for each other in Christ Jesus. Through you, I wish to leave the entire ecclesial community in Ireland with a thought which I already expressed during my visit to Maynooth in 1979: "You must work with the conviction that this generation... could be crucial and decisive for the future of the faith in Ireland. Let there be no complacency. As Saint Paul said: 'Be awake to all the dangers; stay firm in the faith; be brave and strong (Cfr. 1 Cor. 16, 13)' (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio in aede Collegii S. Patricii apud "Maynooth" habita*, 3 die 1 oct. 1979: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, II, 2, (1979) 489)". May the Blessed Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, Queen of Ireland, intercede for you, the pastors, and for the beloved Church in your land.

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