



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA» VISIT**

*Wednesday 8 June, 1988*

*Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,*

1. Your welcome presence here today evokes the remembrance of all those events that we celebrated together in the Provinces of Los Angeles and San Francisco during my Pastoral Visit last September.

Each event not only concerned the local Church but involved the participation of many other people. Besides, there was the extensive spiritual presence of millions of the faithful. In this way, for example, I could address from San Francisco the whole Catholic laity and all the Religious of the United States. The previous events in Los Angeles and Monterey likewise had a great significance for the direction that the Catholic Church must take in her own life and in her service to humanity, as she moves, under the action of the Holy Spirit, toward the purification so necessary for a proper celebration of the Millennium. It would take a great deal of time to recall in detail all the events that we lived together in California. Although it is not possible to do so at this moment, I would request the Church in the United States to re-live the commitment of those days and also renew her openness to the word of God as proclaimed by the Successor of Peter in those situations. This attitude is necessary to ensure the success of *an overall pastoral plan* that must wisely guide the Church in your country in the years ahead.

2. One event of those days has a very special relevance now. It is the visit that I made to the Basilica of Carmel and to *the tomb of Fray Junipero Serra*. In less than three months from now, some of us will gather again here as the Church beatifies him, officially proclaiming him worthy of honour and imitation by all. In venerating “the Apostle of California” at his tomb I spoke of his contribution, which was “to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ at the dawn of a new age” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Allocutio in loco v.d. 'Missione di San Carlo Borromeo' in urbe 'carmel', ubi veneratur*

*sacellum Fratris Junipero Serra*, 1, die 17 sept. 1987: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, X, 3 (1987) 604 s). I also endeavoured to present his essential message, which is *the constant need to evangelize*. In that context I stated: "Like Father Serra and his Franciscan brethren, we too are called to be evangelizers, to share actively in the Church's mission of making disciples of all people".

Initial evangelization and continuing evangelization are pressing needs in the world today. As the Church pursues this task of hers – striving to relate the mystery of man to the mystery of God – she needs to have very clear ideas of her goal and the means by which she proposes to attain it. Of great help in all of this are the guiding principles and succinctly formulated intuitions of the Second Vatican Council. One of these truths so forcefully expressed by the Council is "that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). To understand humanity fully, including its dignity and its destiny, the world must understand Christ. Christ not only reveals God to man but he also reveals man to himself. *The mystery of humanity becomes comprehensible in the Incarnate Word*. This principle becomes a guiding force for the Church in all her activities which are directed to clarifying the mystery of humanity in the mystery of Christ.

3. Above all, this is true in *catechesis*, where the Church endeavours to lead the individual to a greater self-understanding through, in, and with Christ. To reach God, man must understand himself, and to do this he must look to Christ. The human being is created in *the image and likeness of God*. The full image of God is eternally found in Christ, whom Saint Paul calls the "image of the invisible God" (*Col. 1, 15*).

As a creature, man is also *a social being* called to live in community with others. The highest form of community and interpersonal relation is that lived by Christ in the communion of the Most Holy Trinity.

The human being further understands himself as made up of *body and soul intimately* united in one person. In Christ there are hypostatically united in the one divine person both the human and the divine natures. Man's wonderful destiny is to share, through Christ's humanity, in his divine nature (Cfr. *2 Petr. 1, 4*). Man is called to glorify God in his body and treat his body in a way worthy of its dignity (Cfr. *Col. 2, 9*). In Jesus himself there dwells, bodily, the fullness of divinity. Through his intellect man surpasses the whole of the material universe and comes into contact with the divine truth. Jesus as the Incarnate Word claimed in all exactness to be identified with that truth, when he said: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (*Jo. 14, 6*).

By the action of the Holy Spirit man is in a position to know the plan of God, as regards both creation and redemption. Jesus himself is that *plan of God*: "Through him all things came into being, and apart from him nothing came to be" (*Ibid. 1,3*). Moreover, we know that God has made him "our wisdom and also our justice, our sanctification and our redemption" (*1 Cor. 1, 30*).

In coming to know himself, man detects in the depth of his conscience a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him in obedience (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 16). Jesus himself reveals the fullness and essence of all law, which is summarized in the love of God and the love of neighbour (Cfr. *Matth.* 22, 37-40). To love in the way which Jesus commands is the only way to satisfy fully the human heart.

Authentic *freedom* is a special sign of God's image in man. Jesus the man embodies the highest form of human freedom, by which he consecrates his life and his death to his Father and lives totally according to his will. He declares that his freedom is for his Father when he says: "I always do what pleases him" (*Io.* 8, 29). At the same time Jesus destroys what is opposed to freedom in the human person. His mission is to cast out the one who holds man's conscience in bondage.

The final riddle for human beings is *death*. In looking to Christ man learns that he himself is destined to live. Christ's Eucharist is the pledge of life. The one who eats Christ's flesh and drinks his blood already has eternal life (Cfr. *Ibid.*, 6, 54). Finally, in conquering death by his Resurrection Christ reveals the resurrection of all; he proclaims life and reveals man to himself in his final destiny, which is *life*.

4. Of supreme relevance for the Church today is the presentation of *the person of the Incarnate Word as the centre of all catechesis*. Some years ago, in 1971, in accord with the Council's Decree "Christus Dominus" the Congregation for the Clergy issued the *General Catechetical Directory* for the Church. Its aim was to promote a Christocentric catechesis for all the People of God. In doing this it stated: "Catechesis must proclaim Jesus in his concrete existence and in his message, that is, it must open the way for man to the wonderful perfection of his humanity" (CONGR. PRO CLERICIS *Directorium Catechisticum Generale*, 53).

Eight years later I endeavoured to give impetus to this *Christocentric approach* to catechesis by the publication of "Catechesi Tradendae". In this document I said: "At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth... The primary and essential object of catechesis is... "the mystery of Christ". Catechizing is a way to lead a person to study this Mystery in all its dimensions... It is therefore to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God's eternal design reaching fulfilment in that Person... Accordingly, the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Catechesi Tradendae*, 5).

This important effort toward Christocentric catechesis, so fully dealt with in the Synod of 1977 and in the Apostolic Exhortation to which I have alluded, has also become the guiding principle in the preparation of a universal catechism for serving the common needs of the Church. This document is meant to be a point of reference for all the catechetical efforts at the national and diocesan levels, and also for catechisms of a general and special nature which the Bishops may subsequently draft with the purpose of imparting proper knowledge of the content of the Catholic

faith. At the centre of this effort is the profound conviction that the mystery of the Incarnate Word sheds light on all life and human experience and that he himself is in a position personally to communicate the truth that he is. Once again, in the words of "*Catechesi Tradendae*": "We must therefore say that in catechesis it is Christ the Incarnate Word and Son of God who is taught – everything else is taught with reference to him – and it is Christ alone who teaches – anyone else teaches to the extent that he is Christ's spokesman, enabling Christ to speak with his lips" (*Ibid.* 6).

What Christ teaches is *the truth that he is*, in himself and for us. He reminds us: "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (*Jo.* 7, 16). He speaks as the revelation of the Father, the blueprint of all creation, the creating Word of God. In revealing the Father to humanity, Jesus reveals in himself how the Father looks upon humanity. He reveals God's plan for human nature in all its expressions and applications. Human love and human work participate in the divine model of uncreated and creating love. Procreation is a special participation in that divine prerogative. The authenticity and finality of human sexuality, justice and freedom are found in *the eternal plan of God expressed in Christ*.

5. As Pastor of the Church you are daily experiencing, especially in the case of migrants and immigrants, the tragic and pressing *problems of poverty*. You have repeatedly called your people to a sense of solidarity with those in need. You have stood by all those who are struggling to live in a way consonant with their human dignity. You are able to affirm from personal knowledge that "the powerful and almost irresistible aspiration that people have for *liberation* constitutes one of the principal *signs of the times* which the Church has to examine and interpret in the light of the Gospel" (CONGR. PRO DOCTR. FIDEI Instr. *Libertatis Nuntius* de quibusdam aspectibus theologiae liberationis, die 6 aug. 1984, I, 1). At the same time you have experienced how the quest for freedom and the aspiration to liberation, which are universal and yet differ in form and degree among peoples, have their source and impetus in the Christian heritage. In 1979, in the context of Puebla, I proposed three basic truths to orient all the efforts of the Church aimed at liberating and uplifting those in need. These are the truth about Jesus Christ, the truth about the Church, the truth about humanity. In effect, however, the truth about the Church and humanity is to be pondered *in the light of the mystery of Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word*.

The same can be said of *all dimensions of the human and Christian life*. God's providence is understood only in conjunction with the eternal destiny of the human person as revealed by the Incarnate Word. The full meaning of *human progress* or development must take into account Christ's teaching: "Not on bread alone is man to live but on every utterance that comes from the mouth of God" (*Matth.* 4, 4; cfr. *Deut.* 8, 3). The *imperfections of human justice* and the inadequacy of all earthly fulfilment are ultimately linked to God's design revealed in Christ that "here we have no lasting city, but seek one that is to come" (*Hebr.* 13, 14). The question of *physical and spiritual suffering* on the part of the innocent requires an explanation that only the Incarnate Word could give. And in order to give it as effectively as possible, he gave it from the

*Cross.*

6. In your ministry as Bishops you constantly come across the complicated phenomena of *agnosticism and atheism*. You are rightly convinced of the need for sustained dialogue and fraternal collaboration in projects of service to humanity. You and your local Churches are committed to giving an explanation for the hope that is in Christianity every time you are asked. You rightly count on the power of example and prayer; you know the need for patience and persevering trust. The great illuminating force, however, for all doubting and denying consciences is only the light of the Incarnate Word which is for them too like “a lamp shining in a dark place until the first streaks of dawn appear and the morning star rises” (2 *Petr.* 1, 19).

In facing atheism, which the Council says is “among the most serious problems of this age” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 19), and which is manifested in phenomena which are quite distinct from one another, the Church must also accept the judgment of the Council that “believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism” (*Ibid.*). This is so to the extent that they fail to reveal the authentic face of God and religion – which is found in the Incarnate Word.

7. In directing the minds and hearts of the faithful to the mystery of the Incarnate Word, the Church ardently desires to bring this mystery to bear on *all human activity, all human culture*. The Church in effect desires *the birth of a new humanism*, profoundly Christian in its inspiration, in which earthly reality in its totality will be elevated by the revelation of Christ. One of the first characteristics of this new humanism is that it marks the community by a sense of interdependence expressed in solidarity. This is in accordance with Christ’s intention to save humanity not merely as individuals, without mutual bonds, but to gather them into a single people. The Second Vatican Council already perceived the existence of this reality when it stated: “Thus we are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by his responsibility towards his brothers and sisters and towards history” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 55). Only with a consciousness of interdependence – pushed to a worldwide dimension – will communities unite to cultivate those natural goods and values that foster the well-being of humanity and constitute its basic culture.

The response of every community, including those in the Church, to a consciousness of interdependence is the exercise of solidarity, which is “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38). In turn this solidarity or determination is expressed in a new moral concern for all the problems faced by humanity. Two extremely relevant problems faced by millions of our brothers and sisters throughout the world are *development and peace* (Cfr. *ibid.* 26). The outcome of these issues is profoundly affected by the way these realities are conceived in the context of a true Christian humanism.

The specific contribution of the Church – of her members and of her individual communities – to

the cause of a new humanism, of true human culture, is *the full truth of Christ about humanity*: the meaning of humanity, its origin, its destiny, and, therefore, its incomparable dignity.

8. Dear brother Bishops: yours is a great task to guide, in union with the universal Church, your local Churches in the way of salvation and with fraternal and paternal love to help the different categories of the faithful to fulfil their duty and privilege of bearing witness to Christ in the world. But you must also remember – and this will bring you great joy – that you are the principal communicators of Christ the principal catechists of your people, *the principal heralds of the mystery of the Incarnate Word*. To you and to all your brothers in the College of Bishops, united with the Successor of Peter, there has been entrusted, in a unique way, for faithful custody and effective transmission, the truth of the Gospel. This truth we proclaim not only as salvation and deliverance from evil, but also as the basis of that new humanism which will speak to the whole world about universal solidarity and loving concern for all human beings.

All of this stems, dear Brothers, from that profound conviction and principle enunciated by the Second Vatican Council: “The truth is that only in the light of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light”. In the footsteps of your own Apostle of California, and in solidarity with all your evangelizing predecessors, may you continue to proclaim confidently up and down El Camino Real, and beyond, the mystery of the Incarnate Word. In his love I send my blessing to all the priests, deacons, Religious, seminarians and laity of California, Hawaii and Nevada. “Peace to all of you who are in Christ” (1 *Petr.* 5, 14).

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