



# The Holy See

---

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Friday, 7 October 1988*

*Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,*

1. In you, the Bishops of Region III, I greet with deep pastoral love all the People of God in the States of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. During your *ad Limina visit* the bands of hierarchical communion are being strengthened between the Bishop of Rome and his Brothers in the Episcopate, together with their local Churches. At the same time, the horizon of our pastoral service opens wide to view the Church as "a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race".

In this context we are called to renew our zeal for the unity of all Christians, as well as our openness to those who profess other religions and indeed to all people of good will. This is the reflection that I would now like to make with you.

Our faith in the Church is inseparable from our profession that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God".

The mysterious communion between God and man in Christ is prolonged in the Church. The Church is the fruit of that hypostatic union which achieved its full redeeming efficacy in the Paschal Mystery. And the Church is the means that the Holy Spirit uses to incorporate all people into Christ by incorporating them into the Church. Indeed, the Church belongs to the work of redemption. In Christ she is throughout all history the instrument of saving communion which is open to all humanity.

There is a close relationship between the temporal and visible ecclesial communion and the eternal and invisible communion of the Most Holy Trinity. They are not parallel realities. As the Second Vatican Council says, citing Saint Cyprian, the Church is “made one with the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”. The communion of the Blessed Trinity is the source from which is derived the communion of the pilgrim Church, that earthly sphere of saving union with God. With deep faith the Second Vatican Council teaches that “this pilgrim Church is necessary for salvation”.

2. A great love of God’s plan of salvation in Christ and the conviction of the necessity of the Church are at the root of that zealous sense of mission which should animate all Catholics. Opposed to this zeal is the relativism which would deny the unique value of Christ’s Gospel and his Church. To offer Christ and his message to the world will always be a challenge to Christian fidelity and pastoral wisdom.

If we are convinced – and we are – that Christ is the fullness of Truth; if we profess – and we do – that the Church has been instituted by Christ for the salvation of all, then, to be consistent we will want to engage constantly in the dialogue of salvation, so that as many as possible may find joy in the Good News of God’s merciful love revealed in his Son Jesus Christ.

Since it is charity that spurs us on in our task, we will carry out this mission with prayer, good example and sacrifice – with a charity that expresses the beliefs of others. Zeal for the Gospel of Christ, which should characterize all of the faithful, leads us to understand, to forgive and to respect the action of God’s grace which works through human freedom.

We do not subject people to pressure or offend anyone when we follow in Christ’s footsteps and travel the path of self-denial and service that began in Bethlehem, was consummated on the Cross and reaches us in the Eucharist.

3. It is also necessary to increase unity and fraternal love among Catholics. This is essential if our ecumenical zeal is to be credible: “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”. As my Predecessor Paul VI so clearly said at the time of the Council: “The unity of the Church must be received and recognized by each and every member of the Church, and it must be promoted, loved and defended by each and every member of the Church. It is not enough to call oneself a Catholic. We must be truly united”. And he continued: “Today people speak a great deal about reestablishing unity with our separated brethren, and this is good. This is a very worthwhile endeavor, and we all ought to cooperate in it with humility, tenacity and confidence. But we must not forget our duty to work even more for the Church’s internal unity, which is so necessary for her spiritual and apostolic vitality”.

On the occasion of our meeting today, dear Brothers, when there is manifest a *communio* which is both affective and effective, I cannot but repeat what the Council said about our role in this regard:

“The Roman Pontiff, as the Successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the Bishops and of the faithful. The individual Bishops, however, are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular Churches”. May all of us work together to foster the inner unity of the Church which is the will of Christ and which also guarantees the effectiveness of our ecumenical efforts.

4. Within the Catholic Church herself we have to live the well-known maxim: *in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas*. In this way we can properly combine unity with diversity and ensure the necessary climate of freedom within the ecclesial community. This principle sustains the common patrimony of faith and moral teaching while leaving options in theological studies, spirituality, means of evangelization, and ways of infusing the Christian spirit into the temporal order. In the one Body of Christ there will always be room for a variety of ministries and for the development of associations, groups and movements of different types. As Pastors of God’s people we must love legitimate diversity in the Catholic Church, and loyally respect and help direct to the common good all authentic charisms wherever they are found among the faithful. It is a part of our own charism to authenticate the discernment of these gifts. The diversity of ministries and institutions allows individuals and communities, under the leadership of the Bishops in effective communion with the Bishop of Rome, to find their proper way within the universal pilgrimage of the Church.

5. The climate of freedom in the Church should be accompanied by a truly adequate catechesis on ecumenism. Among all the Catholic faithful there should be an open and committed attitude with respect to the ecumenical movement, particularly where there is frequent contact with other Christians. There is a great tradition of pastoral activity in this area on the part of the Bishops of the United States. Without treating the subject at length, I would just like to emphasize several related points.

It is necessary to continue to explain the Council’s teaching that the one Church of Christ “subsists in the Catholic Church”, and to show how much the Catholic Church desires to see realized within the one Church the unity of all Christ’s followers, “so that the world may believe”.

Any progress which the Catholic Church makes along the path of ecumenism must always be in keeping with the organic development of doctrine. Although the patrimony of faith and moral teaching can be better explained and understood, the essential content of salvation which the Catholic Church has always proclaimed must remain intact. When new doctrinal and moral questions arise, the Church must resolve them with the same principles and with the same logic of faith with which she has acted from her origins under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

All the faithful should know the Church’s principles governing common worship or “*communicatio in sacris*”. These principles were succinctly outlined by the Council. Their proper application, which has been the constant solicitude of the Holy See, is indeed an effective contribution to

authentic ecumenism. Canon 844 is particularly relevant to the question as it concerns the Sacraments of Penance, the Eucharist and the Anointing of the Sick. When the reasons regulating the discipline of intercommunion are explained, the Eucharistic assembly can more easily understand that there is an indissoluble link between the mystery of the Church and the mystery of the Eucharist, between ecclesial and Eucharistic communion.

There are many practical opportunities for priests in parishes to explain these principles, such as weddings and funerals. Every effort made to encourage Christians to pray for full Christian unity and to promote it by proper means helps ecumenism. Explaining the conditions for receiving Holy Communion and the reasons for these conditions fosters the cause of both truth and fraternal love.

6. Much has been done in the United States to bring Christians closer together. The strong desire for full communion has been expressed in ways that amply show the impulse given by the Second Vatican Council, an impulse which the Holy See has constantly upheld in its efforts to implement the Council. Catholics have come to acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are found among other Christians. An excellent climate has been created for the continuation of a fruitful dialogue between competent experts. Their efforts to find what is held in common and to formulate the controversial points in terms which render them more exact and more intelligible even to those who do not agree upon them are highly commendable.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has continued to emphasize the importance of prayer and other spiritual means to bring about the full communion in faith and charity that is our goal. We are convinced that the union of Christians can only be the fruit of grace, a sign of that forgiveness of God which we must first humbly implore from him.

Prayer in common has greatly strengthened our ties and advanced the cause of true Christian unity. I myself cherish the memory of the Service of Christian Witness at the University of South Carolina a little more than a year ago.

To be applauded also is the whole network of cooperation among fellow Christians in activities which have a social dimension and which ultimately serve to promote the welfare of all the citizens of your country.

I would encourage you, as I also mentioned on my first pastoral visit to the United States, to undertake in common a creative ecumenical action especially as regards the sacred value of marriage, family life and the unborn.

In all this, it is essential for us to live a more intense Christian life. The Council placed ecumenism in the context of the *renovatio Ecclesiae*, and saw its immediate source in interior conversion and in holiness of life. This profound conviction continues to be valid.

Special emphasis has to be placed on the dynamic Christocentrism of the ecumenical movement: union with Christ and love for him is the key to union and love in the Church. From this source we draw the strength to pursue the evangelizing mission with all its demands.

7. The Church must make herself available to all people. She comes forth from the redeeming love of Christ who died for all. An important part of this attitude is the Church's respect for different religions. In them there can frequently be found the *semina Verbi*, the presence of a truth which, although hidden in shadow, leads people towards the complete encounter with God in Christ. The Church will always strive to defend these values.

The many "unchurched" people of our cities and towns deserve our special attention and fraternal love. It is necessary that Catholics become closer to them and help them discover their true vocation in Christ. This is the best service we can render to them and the best expression of solidarity and friendship.

Dear Brothers: by God's grace the Catholic Church in the United States of America has been very fruitful in holiness and love. This has happened in a society which from its origins has been pluralistic and open to all men and women. An important aspect of this vigor of Catholicism is found in the union of truth and freedom. Upon you, Pastors of the Church in the United States, rests this great heritage, with its immense challenges. I ask Saints Peter and Paul to support you in your arduous apostolic labors and I commend you all to Mary, Queen of the Apostles and Mother of Christ's Church.

© Copyright 1988 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

---

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana