



The Holy See

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

Monday, 24 October 1988

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. My fraternal welcome goes to all of you, the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Cincinnati and Detroit; at the same time I extend cordial greetings to all the faithful throughout the States of Michigan and Ohio, who are spiritually present here with you today.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that only Christ has taught the whole truth about man, and he has done so “by the revelation of the Father and his love”. Christ has revealed the greatness of the Father’s love not only with words but above all through the total giving of himself in sacrifice. To see Christ is to see the Father. Christ also shows that the Father’s is more powerful than any kind of evil which is in man, in humanity or in the world. This love is present in the personal history of each human being. To understand the Church of the Incarnate Word it is necessary to understand God’s love.

2. One of the most important expressions of his love is the love of Christian couples. Since “God is love”, and since man is created in the image and likeness of God, there is inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the “capacity and responsibility of love”. Love in its deepest and richest meaning involves self-giving. Christ, the Son of God and perfect Image of the Father, gave himself totally in the very fullness of love through his redeeming Sacrifice. In the case of husband and wife, genuine love is expressed in the gift of self to each other, which includes giving the power to beget life. In the words of “[*Gaudium et Spes*](#)”: “This love is an eminently human one since it is directed from one person to another through an affection of the will. It involves the good of the whole person... Such love, merging the human with the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves”. “From one person to another” (a persona in personam): these few

words express a profound truth about conjugal love, a love which is eminently interpersonal. It is a love which involves the gift of the whole person. Included in this gift is their whole sexuality with its openness to the transmission of life.

3. As we commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the teaching of the “prophetic” Encyclical “*Humanae Vitae*” of Paul VI, we see ever more clearly today how relevant and positive it is. In this anniversary year I wish to make special mention of our pastoral concerns for marriage and family life. I note with interest and gratitude the Statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee for Pro-Life Activities commemorating the Encyclical. As we all know, marriage is much more than a social institution; it is truly, in Paul VI’s words, “the wise institution of the Creator to realize in mankind his design of love”. The Church’s teaching on marriage is fundamental to understanding the many dimensions of the marriage relationship, especially the sexual dimension.

For sexuality is not just a biological reality, but concerns the innermost being to the human person as such. It allows spouses to express in a specific way that interpersonal love that binds them together in a permanent, faithful and exclusive covenant, and that leads them to parenthood.

Marriage is a unique type of relationship and all the actions whereby spouses manifest their love for each other are part of God’s plan and signs of his love. In the sexual act the married couple have the opportunity to grow in grace, in intimacy, in generosity and in their willingness to cooperate with God in bringing into being new human persons. But in order to strengthen their love and deepen their unity, married couples must be led to appreciate ever more fully “the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning”. In a world that often reduces sex to the pursuit of pleasure, and in some cases to domination, the Church has a special mission to place sex in the context of conjugal love and of generous and responsible openness to parenthood.

4. As Pastors we must encourage couples to maintain an openness to life and a spirit of joyful sharing in regard to children. As the Council has taught us, children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute in their own way to making their parents holy. But materialistic and selfish attitudes often deny the value of the child. Each child, however is a new revelation of God’s love and of the fidelity of the spouses. “Each child is also a test of our respect for the mystery of life, upon which, from the very first moment of conception, the Creator places the imprint of his image and likeness”.

I deeply appreciate the efforts of your Episcopal Conference to proclaim the sanctity of human life from conception onwards. Throughout the world we have seen an increase in the number of abortions and a decline in the protection of unborn human life. The Bishops of the United States have steadfastly opposed this destruction of human life by programs of education and pastoral

care and by advocating laws and public policies that protect and sustain human life, before and after birth. Your annual “Respect Life Program” continues the effort to create respect for human life at every stage and in every circumstance.

This twentieth anniversary of “[Humanae Vitae](#)” challenges us once again as Pastors to intensify our efforts to present Christian marriage as a vocation to holiness, and to help couples understand the role of the Christian family in the life and mission of the Church. We are called to provide engaged and married couples with the fullness of the Church’s teaching on human sexuality, conjugal love and responsible parenthood. We must emphasize the sanctity of human life as a precious gift from God that needs to be protected and fostered, while making greater and more systematic efforts to offer instruction in the natural methods of family planning. Natural family planning enables couples to understand God’s design for sex, invites them to dialogue, mutual respect, shared responsibility and self-control. Our people need to have prayerful confidence that God will bless and sustain them in their efforts to lead lives of holiness and to be witnesses to his love in the modern world.

5. Another indispensable form of witness to God’s love for humanity is the practice of the evangelical counsels in consecrated life. The Church profoundly esteems consecrated persons. She rejoices in their consecration and their special witness to love. Chastity, poverty and obedience are manifestations of love not only because they are at the root of innumerable and sublime apostolic works which serve the needs of humanity, but above all because they express the power of Christ’s Paschal Mystery, which conquers everything that is opposed to the love of God. To understand love fully, the world needs the sign of the authentic “contradiction” provided by religious consecration. This religious consecration will be authentically actuated in the true love of self-giving when consecrated persons act in union with the Church, in conformity with the teaching and directives of the magisterium of Peter and of pastors in communion with him.

6. The Church offers to the world a witness of singular importance to Christ’s love through the celibacy of her priests. Celibacy involves the total gift of self to the Lord for life-long service in his Church, with the renunciation of marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of God. It is a gift that God gives to his Church and that manifests the charity which inspires her. The Council showed the courage of faith when it reaffirmed the traditional discipline of celibacy with full confidence that God would not fail to continue to bestow the graces which support this charism.

Priestly celibacy signifies that the priest is not a delegate of the people or even a “functionary” of God, but a true witness to God’s love for his people. The rule of celibacy for the Latin Church is more than an ecclesiastical law. It has deep theological and doctrinal roots that confirm its value and show its desirability for those who are chosen to act in persona Christi capitis. Last year marked the twentieth anniversary of the Encyclical “[Sacerdotalis Caelibatus](#)”. May all of us, together with our priests, continue to find inspiration in this teaching as we strive to proclaim the love of Christ in all its fullness.

7. The different forms of witness to God's love for humanity are linked in no small way to the pastoral love of Bishops, who teach, govern and sanctify the People of God. We all know the profound reality to which Jesus himself made reference when he cited the prophetic words: "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered". We should never lose sight of the fact that to a great extent the eternal happiness and even the temporal wellbeing of innumerable people depend on our own faithfulness to Christ's grace.

Certainly we face difficulties in exercising our mission as shepherds. Fear may beset our hearts. Will we be understood? Will our message be accepted? How will the world react? How will public opinion judge us? Will our human weakness impede our mission? It is in these moments that we recognize that our love, our pastoral charity still needs to grow. With Saint John we must confess: "Love has no room for fear; rather perfect love casts out all fear... love is not yet perfect in one who is afraid". And because love is a victory over fear, it is a triumph in our ministry.

It is necessary now more than ever to proclaim to the world the truth in love, including "the fullness of truth which sometimes irritates and offends even if it always liberates". In the faithful, persevering and courageous proclamation of God's word, we Pastors must fulfil our mission and our destiny as witnesses of divine love.

The Bishop's love for his priests will be a particularly effective expression and sign of the love of Christ. With his deep fraternal and paternal interest in them, with his understanding, human affection and concern for whatever weighs upon them – while encouraging them to strive for holiness in spite of human weakness – the Bishop must help his priests to be witnesses before the people to that love which is at the root of every apostolate. Through the Bishop, priests should be able to experience once again the power of Christ's love for all humanity, so that with the Beloved Disciple they will be able to say: "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us".

As heralds of Christ's love we turn to his Mother Mary, Mater pulchrae dilectionis, to continue in prayer our reflection on that great mystery of love which comes forth from, and returns to, the Most Holy Trinity-to whom be glory forever and ever.

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